Katherine Balfour

DR. MIRABEL'S THEORY.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

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Dr. Mirabel's Theory

BY

Ross George Dering

Author of 'Giraldi'

'The Undergraduate,' etc.

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY

"Mind and matter," said the lady in the wig, "glide swift into the vortex of Immensity."—DICKENS.

In Three Volumes

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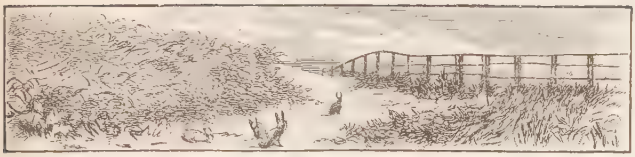

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DR. MIRABEL'S THEORY.

CHAPTER I.

CLOUDS.

A SUDDEN change, very characteristic of our English summers, now took place in the weather. Hitherto the season had been an unusually fine one. Weeks of hot, genial sunshine had succeeded each other almost without a break, everything pointed to a splendid harvest, and the country had been wearing its gayest and most attractive aspect. Then the barometer began to fall. The weather became cold and unsettled; a chilly rain set in, driven obliquely by strong north-easterly winds,

and the sun seemed to have retired from active service altogether. Poor Mrs. Palliser, who had a bad circulation, took to woollen wrappers and a fire; her husband, vaguely uncomfortable, perplexed yet not in despair, found refuge from disturbing money-articles in a violent cold in the head; while Gerard, in gaiters and thick boots, sought oblivion of his own troubles by taking interminable walks across country in the pouring rain.

But it was not only the weather which had suddenly turned perverse. The political firmament became overcast. Rumours of a Russian conspiracy in the Balkans, combined with French intrigues in Egypt, provoked a feeling of general uneasiness; a leading Minister, speaking at a public banquet, gave the customary assurances that peace was certain and war impossible in such very guarded, involved, and ambiguous words that some people understood them as a warning that hostilities were on the point

of breaking out; an old French applewoman, straying inadvertently with her basket across the German frontier, was immediately arrested by the military on plea of suspicion that she was a distinguished general in disguise—an outrage which set all Paris in a flame; and finally, a black leather bag, which looked as though it might contain dynamite, was discovered beneath the Woolsack in the House of Lords. The effect of all these 'political straws' upon the Bourses of Europe was of course disastrous. Consols fell, and money tightened. Under ordinary circumstances all this would not have mattered very much, for in spite of everything the rulers of Europe did somehow manage not to go to war—a most creditable and statesmanlike achievement, when we recollect that each potentate had constituted himself Chief Peacekeeper of the Continent, and could by no means brook the smallest rivalry or infringement of his prerogative on the part of any other potentate, great or small; but

unfortunately there were other causes at work, prejudicial to a sound financial state, and the outlook grew gradually darker. For months past there had been a terrible amount of over-speculation. Shares which had no existence had of course been bought and sold over and over again. Time bargains had already led to the declaration of several large defaulters. An enormous amount of scrip was held on hypothecation by the banks; prices fell almost daily, more cover was demanded—in some cases not forthcoming—and advances were almost unobtainable at any figure. It was this shaky and threatening condition of affairs that now began to render even Mr. Palliser a trifle uneasy, for all that he was so sanguine and so buoyant naturally; and well it might, if the truth were only known, for the good gentleman's investments were not all of them of the very soundest sort.

One evening Gerard was sitting with the Mirabels. It was about nine o'clock—chilly,

drizzling, and comfortless; but there was a bit of bright fire in the grate, which looked quite cheerful. Mirabel, in his gayest mood, occupied a luxurious easy-chair on the side furthest from the door, a shaded lamp standing on a table at his elbow; his wife sat opposite, her face in the shadow. They were talking of the unsettled condition of public affairs, political and pecuniary.

"Ah, yes!" exclaimed Mirabel, in answer to a remark of Gerard's about the uncertainties and troubles of life generally. "It is all unsatisfactory enough, no doubt. We come into the world, and we must either eat or die. If we have enough to eat, well and good; but if not—ah, then it is not good, because we must suffer cruelly. The trouble is with our bodies. If we had no bodies—ah, how cheap it would be! No food or wine to buy or run in debt for, no tailors' bills—no worry, no pain, no anything. That is the ideal existence. And it will come for all of us, some day."

"I don't think this world would be so bad if we were better adapted to our environment," said Gerard.

"Of course not!" said Mirabel, laughing. "Complete adaptation to one's environment means complete satisfaction, complete happiness. It is heaven, and the only heaven there is or can be. And I think it will exist in the new sphere. Strange! A few weeks ago I thought I should be there by now. And I wonder where I would have went to first. Ah, it is a grand field, a grand field — the Illimitable Space! But there is nothing so foolish as to go abroad before you know your own country. I am very anxious to explore the Pleiades, but I must do the Solar System first of all. Mars, Venus, and above all Saturn—Saturn with his rings of wonder and of beauty! Ah, there is a prospect for you. Come, Gerard, —would you not like it too? Suppose we go together!"

His tone was gay, playful, but eager—

with the eagerness of a child at the prospect of some delightful journey or anticipated treat. Gerard laughed, and then heaved a light sigh.

"Yes," he said, "I wouldn't mind—if only I were as sure of it all as you are."

"You are too sceptical," rejoined Mirabel, with an air of cheery reproof. "You prefer to doubt everything. My wife is vorse—she deny everything. I have no more hope for her. But you—ah, you will agree with me, some day."

"It wouldn't require much to convince me that there may be a better sort of world than this," replied Gerard. "There could scarcely be a worse, I should think."

"Ah, bah!" exclaimed the other. "It has his alleviations—everything has his alleviations. Even looking forward to the next one is an alleviation. It will be a great thing to *live*—to enjoy a life that shall be full; full, and perfect, and free."

"I hope you won't forget the friends you

leave behind you," said Gerard, smiling. "You can't take us all with you, I'm afraid."

"I do not think I shall forget you," replied Mirabel, quietly.

It struck Gerard as a little curious that he did not include his wife. Perhaps it was from a delicate sense of her total disbelief in a future state.

"Well, and how is the old good papa?" resumed Mirabel, after a pause.

"Oh—he's got an awful cold," said Gerard. "Blows his nose like a trumpet, you know, and waters at the eyes. Otherwise he's all right."

"Blows the nose like a trumpet, eh?" said the other. "Well, that is a good sign; it shows he is a strong man. Does he make a very large noise when he sneeze?"

"Bellows like a bull," answered Gerard with a slight grin.

"Excellent!" said Mirabel. "He must be what you call 'hearty old cock.' All that is very good for the lungs; almost as good

as laughing. To laugh, and to shout, and to blow the nose like a bull, is a great preservative of the health. His bad cold will not do him any harm."

"No," said Gerard, rather slowly. "I fancy he's a little worried, too, about matters in the City; and then, of course, we've all been a good deal cut up lately."

"Ah, yes; the poor grandmamma," said Mirabel, in a low voice.

Madame Mirabel had made no attempt to join in the conversation. She was sitting a little apart from the others, and seemed engrossed in her own thoughts. She now spoke for the first time.

"I thought I heard the door," she said, without moving.

"The door?" repeated Mirabel. "It must be the good Lancaster; he have neglected us very much of late. He want a good round scolding."

"You've been so much better, you know," said his wife.

A step was heard in the hall, and Dr. Lancaster entered briskly. Mirabel received him with a torrent of playful reproaches. Gerard rose and offered him his chair, taking, himself, a vacant seat next to his hostess.

"Yes, I know I've been very remiss," acknowledged Lancaster with a laugh. "However, I don't think you look much the worse for it. How have you been since I saw you? It must be nearly a week ago."

"Oh, pretty well—very much as usual," answered Mirabel.

"That's all right," said Lancaster, rubbing his hands. "How cosy this fire looks; it's wretchedly chilly outside, especially driving. By the way, talking of fires, there's just been a fire at Churt, and I have positively been helping to put it out."

"At Churt," remarked Mirabel. "Was he a big one?"

"He might have been, if he hadn't been taken in time," replied the doctor, laughing.

"And what house do you think it was?" he continued, addressing Gerard.

"I can't possibly tell," said Gerard.

"Why, the very cottage I called at the other day when you were with me," continued Lancaster; "inhabited"—turning to Madame Mirabel—"by an old woman and her daughter, a girl who for some weeks past has lost the use of her legs. The mother was out when it took place and the girl was alone. Well,"—

"Alone?" interrupted Gerard. "Why, she couldn't stir hand or foot! She wasn't burnt, was she?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Lancaster. "The fire was the best thing that ever happened to her in her life. She turned her head round in bed, apparently, attracted by the blaze of the window-curtains, and then, in a moment of panic, leaped out as actively as you or I, and ran screaming into the next cottage. You see I was right about her legs; there was nothing wrong

with them at all, and she forgot all about them under the excitement of sudden fear. I happened to be passing a few minutes afterwards, and rendered what assistance I could. But it has cured the girl, and I hope she'll have more confidence in what I tell her next time."

"But what was the matter with her? Tell us all about it," said Mirabel, with interest.

Dr. Lancaster accordingly gave them a full account of the case, with the details of which Gerard was already acquainted. The story delighted Mirabel; even his wife was interested.

"The influence of mind on matter," said the former, "is not only a fact which is beyond dispute, but one of the most important agencies in the human life. We know very little about it yet, but the fact itself is recognised, and that will lead to investigation. You know how I explain it, of course. Well, in a few years all our know-

ledge of it will be gradually systematised, and then "—

"And then what?" said Lancaster smiling, as the other paused.

"No, no; the conditions are unfavourable," said Mirabel, with a laugh. "Julie will mock at me. She don't believe in anything."

"Perhaps I am more open to conviction than you suppose," remarked his wife, with a slight smile.

"Well, I have a piece of news for you," said Lancaster, seeing that Dr. Mirabel was not anxious to pursue the subject. "Do you remember my saying something to you about a friend of mine named Bretschneider —Dr. Bretschneider?" he asked, turning to Madame Mirabel.

"Bretschneider? No, I don't think I do," she replied, abstractedly.

"Oh, surely you can't have forgotten," returned Lancaster. "I was telling you about it some three weeks or a month ago; how he wanted me to go and take part

in a conference of doctors respecting some investigations that have been made recently into these reputed cancer-remedies of Count Mattei's, only there was some hitch as to their being all able to meet at the proposed time. I thought you seemed rather interested in it."

"Ah, I do remember now," said Madame Mirabel. "It had completely slipped my memory. The meeting was to have been at Lausanne, wasn't it?"

"Lucerne," corrected the doctor. "The symposium was to have consisted of Bretschneider himself, a French physician named De Véranges, and two Italian surgeons; I was to make the fifth. Well, the difficulty seems now to have been got over, for I had a telegram from Bretschneider this very afternoon, asking me to run over there at once. He says the others are expected about Sunday."

"Really?" said Madame Mirabel. "And do you think you shall go?"

"Well—it certainly is a temptation," replied Lancaster. "The subject is one that interests me deeply, and I have long desired an opportunity of looking into it. Any theory, any claim even, that professes to be supported by results, has a strong attraction for me. Of course I know well enough that Mattei is denounced as a quack by many people. Well, if he is one, the sooner we expose him the better. If not,—if he really does possess a pathological secret of such immense value as he says—it ought to be investigated. M de Véranges, I am told, has made a close study of the question, and I am very anxious to hear what he has to say about it."

"And have you no predisposition either way?" asked Madame Mirabel.

"None whatever," said the doctor promptly. "My own theory of disease is simple enough. The human body is a mass of bacilli, germs, bacteria, spores, and microbes. Some of these are beneficent—necessary, indeed, to

health. Others are malignant, and produce disease. These are facts; and on these facts I bring to bear the theory—which is only a working hypothesis, so to speak—that the activity of either class is determined mainly, at any rate, by the ebb and flow of the vital principle. When a man's vitality is strong and vigorous, the noxious organisms become proportionately enfeebled, and are then preyed upon by their rivals; when the ebb sets in, the health-producing germs lose their power, and a reversal of the process is the result. This is the hypothesis I am anxious to put to every possible test, and that is one reason why I should be so sorry to lose the opportunity now offered."

"Quite so," remarked Madame Mirabel, thoughtfully. "Well I hope you will enjoy the trip. It will be delightful to get out of all this cold and wet. I suppose your patients, in the meantime,"—

"Don't imagine I haven't thought of

them," interrupted Lancaster. "Of course you're thinking of your husband. What do you say, Mirabel? Don't you think I'm paying your improved health the greatest compliment I can, in proposing to leave you for a week or two?"

Mirabel had made no remark when Lancaster had first spoken of his intention, but he had listened to it in something like dismay. It was certainly a blow to him. Not only did he prize the companionship of Lancaster for its own sake, but he had become firmly convinced that his renewed vitality was directly due to some vitalising or magnetic influence exercised by Lancaster himself; and the threatened withdrawal of this, though only for a time, disturbed him very much. He was, however, far too unselfish and sweet-tempered to show the slightest reluctance when the appeal was made.

"No doubt, no doubt," he replied, with a smile. "You are the best judge. I am

entirely in your hands. But I shall be very glad when you come back."

"If I thought there was the slightest danger of a relapse I wouldn't dream of going," said Lancaster, seriously. "But you really have gained so much strength lately that I am not afraid. Charlton will look after you while I'm away, if necessary. You know I always believed that I had nothing to do with your recovery. It has been a case in which the vital forces have suddenly rallied, and all we have to do now is to keep them up to the mark. I shall be very curious to see how you look when I come back again."

"Shall you call at our place before you go?" asked Gerard.

"Certainly," replied the doctor. "But I leave your grandmother in the best possible hands. You'll find Nurse Osborne a much more efficient doctor than I am, in that particular case. I've the fullest confidence in her, both as regards experience and tact.

I'll look in some time in the morning, probably."

"When do you think you shall start?" enquired Madame Mirabel.

"I shall try and get away by the night boat from Folkestone," he answered, lighting a cigar.

"We shall all miss you very much," she said, with a slight sigh.

"Ah, that we shall," added Mirabel.

"Well, I'm not going away for ever," said Lancaster, smiling.

"You'll have a wretched crossing, I'm afraid," remarked Madame Mirabel.

"I don't suppose I shall be as comfortable as I am now."

The conversation flagged a little after this, and in about a quarter of an hour Lancaster began to think of moving, on the plea of having letters to write and various necessary arrangements to make before going to bed. Mirabel was silent and depressed. He had become so dependent on Lancaster's com-

panionship and 'influence,' as he phrased it, taht he found it difficult to envisage the withdrawal of either; while Madame Mirabel, though calm enough, looked more than usually thoughtful. When at last Lancaster got up, and said goodbye, it was only natural that Gerard should propose to accompany him. This, however, the doctor immediately discouraged.

"No, no, I don't want to take you away," he said; "besides, I'm not going in your direction, so I can't offer you a lift."

"Don't go yet, Gerard," said Mirabel, almost sharply. So he stayed.

Then the adieux were exchanged; Lancaster promising, however, to look in again on the morrow if he could possibly manage it. Madame Mirabel accompanied him to the front door, and remained a short time in conversation with him.

"It's very strange he goes away just now," remarked Mirabel when they were alone.

"It does seem sudden," said Gerard. "Still," he added after a pause, "I'm sure he wouldn't leave you if he thought he couldn't do so safely."

"No, I dare say not," replied the other; and relapsed into silence.

In a few minutes Madame Mirabel re-entered. There was a slight flush upon her cheeks, and an unwonted light in her eyes, that might have been noticed had it not been that the greater part of the room was in deep shade. She now came forward with a brisk step, and resumed her former seat.

"Well, we shall see him back soon, I suppose," she observed in her usual matter-of-fact way. "It must be delightful at Lucerne, and I expect he wants a holiday."

"It'll be very hot, won't it?" said Gerard.

"Possibly," she replied. "Some people don't mind the heat. Anything would be preferable to this, I should think."

"I wish things weren't looking so queer

in the City," remarked Gerard, after another pause.

"Does your father seem much worried?" asked Madame Mirabel.

"I think he does," was the reply. "He's a very sanguine man naturally, and I've never seen him look quite like this before."

"I met him in London the other day," she continued. "I told you of it, you know, at the time. He certainly didn't look anxious then; he was the picture of complacency and good spirits I thought."

The fact was, that, although 'things' had worn a very threatening appearance for some time past, nothing had so far occurred to arouse any apprehensions in the mind of Mr. Palliser with respect to his own investments; so that when his stockbroker had spoken to him of the increasing tightness of money and the queerness of the outlook generally, it made no particular impression. Had he pushed his enquiries further, he would have obtained an insight into the

true state of affairs; this, however, in his usual happy-go-lucky way, he entirely failed to do; and it was not until he had received the disagreeable warnings alluded to in the last chapter that he began to scan the money-articles in his morning paper with a trepidation as painful as it was new to him. These symptoms were not lost on Gerard, though he was as yet quite ignorant of his father's actual circumstances.

Mirabel's gaiety having, to all appearance, temporarily forsaken him, his wife now made an effort to keep up the conversation. She and Gerard talked quietly for some time upon indifferent topics, the latter doing his utmost to conceal the depression that he really felt. But, do what he might, an unconquerable sense of foreboding stole over him, as undefinable as it was painful. He knew himself to be dangerously attracted by the woman who sat near him in the semi-darkness, and the knowledge of her husband's presence was irksome to him; at the same

time he was well aware that that presence was his truest safeguard, and, mingled with a torturing uncertainty as to whether there were any hidden feeling for himself in her own breast, was the self-reproachful shame which took all the pleasure from his love. At last the ordeal grew too severe for him. He got up suddenly, and said he must be going. Mirabel, now professing unusual weariness, made no objection, and Madame Mirabel saw him to the door.

"He'll want more looking after, now that Lancaster's away," Gerard said, as they stood upon the threshold.

"I am equal to it," she replied, with a smile.

"You are the very best and dearest woman I ever knew!" he exclaimed, with a sudden impulse, as he took her hand.

She looked him steadily in the eyes with a curious expression. "It is pleasant to have the good opinion of one friend at least," she answered, after a pause.

"You have more than my 'good opinion' —and I believe you know it," he said in a low, fervent tone; almost a whisper. Then he raised her hand to his lips, kissed it passionately, and went out.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNACCOUNTABLE DISAPPOINTMENT.

MADAME MIRABEL'S prediction that Lancaster would have a wretched crossing was amply fulfilled. That night was wet, cold, and rough, and Lancaster, who was a bad sailor, suffered very much. In spite of sickness, however, he resolutely refused to go below; the consequence of which was that he got almost soaked to the skin, and though he escaped the fetid odours of the cabin, which was strewn with persons in the acutest stage of the sea-agony, only did so at the expense of incurring a severe chill. The journey from Boulogne restored him to a certain extent, but on arriving in

Paris he found himself so unwell that he deemed it prudent to remain there for a couple of nights. The Louvre Hotel had not then been removed to make way for the *magasins* which now occupy its site, and it was at the Louvre that he put up, sending a telegram to Dr. Bretschneider to explain the cause of his delay. As soon as he arrived he went to bed, like a prudent man ; as night approached he became feverish, and slept ill; and it was not until the evening of the third day that he felt himself sufficiently recovered to proceed.

As he travelled southward the weather improved, and by the time he got to Basle it was extremely hot. He reached Lucerne on one of those blazing, dazzling days which are so enchanting for the first half-hour or so to a man just escaped from the cold and wet of England, but which so very soon become intolerable ; and the first sight of the exquisite lake sparkling in the sunshine, and the rushing, wonderful, glorious green Reuss,

with its quaint mediæval bridges, came upon him like a sudden glimpse of fairyland. He drew a deep breath of satisfaction and delight; he had never been at Lucerne before, and felt that all the discomforts of his long journey were about to be amply made up to him. Having, after some slight delay, succeeded in obtaining his luggage, he confided it to the care of a porter from the Schweitzerhof who had come to meet the train, and, despising the idea of either fly or omnibus, put up his umbrella and set off for that famous hostelry on foot. He was in a mood to be charmed with everything, and it is not too much to say that everything charmed him. The mountains were looking their very best. Pilatus on one side, the Righi on the other, stood out clear and bold against a dome of sapphire. The old watch-towers and undulating walls of the city, with their rich, dingy colouring, afforded a grateful contrast to the brilliancy by which they were surrounded, and the thick green foliage of

the chestnut trees on the further bank of the river gave the finishing touch to a scene which struck the traveller as one of almost perfect beauty.

The only feature which appeared somewhat discordant to him was the presence of so many smartly dressed English people. He paid but little attention to the promenading crowds, however, and feasted his eyes on the river, the bridges, the mountains, and the lake; and had it not been that a trifling incident occurred when he was about half way to his destination his enjoyment of the short walk he had undertaken would have been undisturbed. Even as it was, he was in no humour to complain. A sound of altercation reached him from a group of persons, two of whom were porters carrying luggage. The third was a thin, wiry-looking elderly woman, somewhat pretentiously dressed, who was objurgating the porters in rather a loud key and excessively doubtful English. Dr. Lancaster, thinking he

might be of some service, slackened his pace, and then goodnaturedly approached.

"Can I assist you in any way?" he asked, shrewdly divining that a confusion of tongues lay at the root of the difficulty.

The old woman glanced suspiciously at him for a moment, as though not quite sure whether he were friend or foe; then, assuming a somewhat stately air, broke forth into denunciations of her two attendants. They knew she had scarcely any time to catch the train, and yet they had loitered till the last moment; they were taking advantage of her necessities to extort ten times their proper wage, and now they had actually set down her boxes in the road and refused to budge another inch until their extravagant demands were complied with. But they were all alike—the whole nation was leagued together to rob unprotected travellers; she had been swindled ever since she first set foot in the place, and if ever she escaped with a whole skin she

prayed Heaven to do so to her and more also should she be fool enough to go near any such thieves and rascals any more.

Dr. Lancaster immediately assured her that she had a full half-hour to spare, so need not be anxious about her train; then, turning to the men, asked them in German what the trouble was. A very few words sufficed to show that the whole dispute had been founded on a misunderstanding. They had only asked the proper price for porterage, and the old lady, apparently mistaking the figure, had point-blank refused to pay it, launching out into a torrent of indignation (in her own tongue) of which they did not understand a word. Lancaster saw at once how the mistake had arisen, and explained the true state of the case to the excited woman, who thereupon thanked him in most gushing style. It was perfectly clear to her, she said, that the men had told him a lie; but now that he had come to the rescue, and was able to talk to them in their

own language, of course they had climbed down. The amount was then solemnly repeated on the one side and agreed to on the other; the porters re-shouldered the boxes, and Dr. Lancaster, after a most dignified bow from the old woman, resumed his way to the hotel.

First he engaged a room, saw to the disposal of his luggage, and went upstairs for a much-needed wash and change. Then, feeling considerably refreshed, and eager to explore the neighbourhood, he came down and made for the front door.

"Is Dr. Bretschneider in?" he said to the hall-porter, on his way out.

The hall-porter could not say; people were going in and out constantly, and he didn't know all their names; but he would enquire, if monsieur would not object to waiting a few minutes.

"Oh, it's of no consequence," replied Lancaster. "I shall be back before very long."

Then, in spite of the broiling sun, he walked once or twice along the avenue skirting the lake, enjoying the occasional puffs of cool wind which came across the water from the snow-clad Alps of Engelberg and Uri. In a short time he turned down one of the streets, haphazard, and found himself in front of Thorwaldsen's inimitable Lion; and, when he had admired this sufficiently, spent half-an-hour of wondering delight in the Gletschergarten. Everything pleased him; and what pleased him most of all was the discovery that he had not outgrown his capacity for enjoyment—as so many of us do, alas! even before we arrive at Lancaster's not very venerable age. For a few hours he was as frankly and unreservedly happy as a boy, and when, a little later, he sat in the cathedral, listening to the wonderful reverberations of Lemmens's 'Storm,' with its exquisite last note—that note which always makes me think of an angel's smile translated into music—he felt

that he had not passed so satisfactory an afternoon for years.

The gong was being banged for dinner as he re-entered. Not seeing Bretschneider anywhere, he took his seat in a quiet corner, and dined comfortably alone, amusing himself by watching the various groups and parties in front of him. When he had finished he rose from table, and, strolling towards the bureau, lighted a cigar.

"Can you tell me where I can find Dr. Bretschneider?" he enquired, addressing the clerk.

"Dr. Bretschneider? I do not know," replied that functionary. "Is he staying in the hotel?"

"I have every reason to believe so," said Lancaster, rather surprised. "He always puts up here."

"Well, we can easily see," said the clerk, turning over the pages of the Visitors' Book. "No—I don't see any such name here."

"That's very curious," remarked Lancaster. "Surely he'd have told me if he had gone anywhere else. Let me have a look, please."

He took the book and scanned its entries narrowly. No—there was nothing. Then he looked back; and at last he found it. Bretschneider had been there just a month before, and had left, four days after arrival, for Milan.

Lancaster was now completely puzzled.

"I don't understand this at all," he said, turning once more to the clerk. "I had a telegram from this gentleman only a few days ago, requesting me to meet him here. He must have come back meantime!"

The clerk examined the letter-rack. "Telegram, did you say?" he answered. "Then I expect it's all right—he hasn't come yet, but he's coming. Here's a telegram that arrived for him three or four days ago."

Lancaster looked at it. "Is this the only

one? No letter, or anything else?" he asked.

"Nothing," replied the clerk.

"My own telegram from Paris!" thought the doctor.

Sorely perplexed, he went out upon the Quay, determined to enquire at all the other hotels. His quest was fruitless. No such person had been seen or heard of. Dr. Bretschneider was evidently not in Lucerne.

And yet he must be. How else could the telegram be accounted for—the telegram in response to which Lancaster himself had come? That was distinctly dated from the Lucerne telegraph-office. Well, he would enquire there.

He went to the office, and asked the clerk if he remembered such-and-such a message being handed in on the previous Monday morning. Of course the clerk was unable to remember anything about it, and naturally asked to see the telegram. But Lancaster, not imagining it would be required, had not

brought it ; he had even torn it up. It had been sent, no doubt—they had the usual record of it, so far, in the shape of counterfoil and entry ; but as to remembering who it was that had handed it in, or any other detail which might have led to some elucidation of the mystery, the thing was quite impossible. Lancaster retired baffled.

His first impulse, as he walked meditatively back to his hotel, was to return to England at once. The next moment he saw the utter futility of such a course. Why not give himself a holiday, now that he was actually upon the continent? Why not go on to Milan, and get an explanation of the mystery from Bretschneider himself? Then another contingency occurred to him. Bretschneider might be in some *pension*, or even have taken private apartments somewhere ; he might—who knows ?—have sent a letter to him, which had gone astray, or been delayed, misdirected, lost ; perhaps, after all, it would be a little precipitate to

leave Lucerne so soon. All the same, the position was most perplexing. He was utterly in the dark. Whichever way he acted, he might blunder. Then a new idea struck him. There were, beside himself, three other doctors in Lucerne, all having the same appointment with Bretschneider. They should be hunted up first, and then, if success failed him there, his only way would be to go straight on to Milan with as little further delay as possible.

Arrived once more at the Schweitzerhof he sat down at one of the writing tables and wrote a letter. There was nothing in it that we do not know already, so we may be excused for looking over his shoulder.

"Schweitzerhof, Lucerne,
"Monday night.

"DEAR MADAME MIRABEL,

"You have no doubt been surprised not to have heard from me since I left England. The fact is, I caught a rather bad chill on the steamer—the crossing was horrible, and my sufferings adequate to the expiation of any number of venial sins—and was consequently forced to take to my bed in Paris;

a misfortune which delayed me about three days. However I am all right now, and, as you see, have arrived safely in Lucerne; but to my great annoyance and perplexity I cannot find Dr. Bretschneider anywhere, and am for the moment quite at a loss what to do. I do not think he is in this place at all, though he certainly must have been here a week ago, when he sent me that telegram; however, I shall continue my search to-morrow, and then if I discover nothing I may possibly run over to Milan, where he was last heard of. It would be a pity to come back at once.

"How is Mirabel? Give him my very kindest regards. I need not urge you to look after him. You are a pattern to all wives and nurses.

"Believe me,

"Ever yours most sincerely,

"EDWARD LANCASTER.

"P.S.—If you have anything to communicate, address to me here. I will leave instructions for all letters to be forwarded should I decide on moving south."

Next morning Lancaster procured a list of the chief *pensions*, and started off upon his rounds. Again he was unsuccessful. No such name as Bretschneider appeared in the Visitors' Book of any one of them; no one knew or had ever heard anything about him. There had been, as usual, plenty of doctors in Lucerne, but they were always coming

and going. At last it occurred to Lancaster to enquire at the 'English' apothecary's in the Züricherstrasse. Here he learnt something. The man of medicine knew Dr. Bretschneider very well. The doctor had been there a month ago, and had then left for Milan, remarking that *he might possibly return in four or five weeks*, though he could not be sure. Those were his very words. He did not say, however, where he intended to remain in the meantime.

If this was the case, thought Lancaster, it was clearly impossible for him to communicate with Bretschneider either by letter or by telegram. He must go in search of him personally, should he decide on running the mystery to earth. Then he asked the chemist whether he knew anything of the other doctors, De Véranges and the two Italians. But the chemist had never even heard their names, and was entirely unable to throw any light upon their whereabouts.

One last chance remained. He enquired

of M. Brünck the addresses of the resident physicians in Lucerne, and then, thanking him for his courtesy, stepped into the street again and turned his face in the direction indicated. But he learnt nothing. Only one of the local practitioners—a short, fat, bland little gentleman, with a pair of enormous spectacles which made him look rather like a benevolent owl—was acquainted with Dr. Bretschneider, and he had not very much to tell. Bretschneider had certainly been in Lucerne a month previously, and had then left for Milan ; he had been hoping to meet two or three *confrères* for the purpose of holding some consultations with them, though upon what subject had not transpired ; the difficulty, thought Dr. Lancaster's informant, lay in the inability of two doctors at Bologna to attend the conference, and he believed—though this was merely a conjecture on his part—that Dr. Bretschneider's journey southward had something to do with this. He had not heard from him since he

went away, and scouted the suggestion that he had returned to Lucerne in the meantime.

Dr. Lancaster, a man who hated mysteries, now began to get rather angry ; though he was fully aware that it was impossible to know whom to be angry with. What exasperated him was his threatened disappointment with regard to the conference upon a scientific problem in the elucidation of which he was profoundly interested, not to mention the insoluble enigma of the telegram. About the former point he did not care to speak, but he had no scruples respecting the latter, and thereupon told Dr. C— the whole story. Bretschneider had sent him a telegram about a week ago, summoning him to Lucerne ; and, now that he had arrived, not only was the man himself nowhere to be found, but everything pointed to the conclusion that he had not even been in the place when the telegram was despatched !

"It is certainly a most extraordinary

affair," observed Dr. C—, assuming a judicial frown which had a very comical effect. "There is something in it, you may depend, of which neither you nor I have any suspicion at all."

"Clearly," replied Lancaster.

"It is equally clear," continued Dr. C—, wagging his head with the complacent air of a man to whom a brick wall presents no obstacle whatever when once he is determined to see through it, "that the telegram you refer to must have been sent by somebody."

Lancaster stared a little, and did not dispute the point.

"The question before us, then," resumed the other, warming to his subject, "is simply this—who was that somebody? Again the answer is clear: it was either Bretschneider, or somebody else."

"That is true of every telegram sent since telegraphy was first invented," remarked Lancaster, rather curtly.

"Not so fast, not so fast, my dear Sir!" cried the little physician, with an airy wave of his little fat right hand. "No doubt, as you very justly observe, the proposition I have laid down is of universal application within the limits you so properly define; but it has a special significance for us in this particular case. Let us see, now," continued Dr. C—, beaming with pleasure at the sound of his own voice, and the prospect of hearing it as long as he could detain his visitor. "Let us argue upon the hypothesis that Bretschneider was the man. Then it follows that he must have been in Lucerne the day on which he telegraphed. But did he stay here, or did he go away again? Once more he must have done either the one or the other. If he stayed, he is no doubt here still. If he went away,—*and has not come back*—we must always make that reservation —it is clear that he cannot be in Lucerne now. See, now, how I am unravelling your mystery! I am great at analysis, my dear

Sir; I have a ve-ry analytical mind. Well, now, look where we have arrived. I have stripped the *affaire Bretschneider* of the accessories which distract; there remains only a residuum of tangible actualities; and where are we? The man has either been here and gone away: or he is actually in Lucerne at the present moment!"

"Which leaves us precisely where we were when we started," replied Lancaster, whose impatience was getting uncontrollable.

"Excellent!" exclaimed the little man, lighting a cigarette and flourishing it round his bald pate in a transport of enthusiasm. "My dear Sir, it is evident that you are an intuitive thinker. For my own part, I am a logical thinker; and we both arrive at the same conclusion. So far, then, we are on the right road. That is a most satisfactory consideration. But there is still an alternative. Supposing the good Bretschneider has been made away with?"

"Impossible," said Lancaster, drawing on his gloves.

"Improbable, at any rate," returned Dr. C—, puffing vigorously at his cigarette. "Let us, then, take up our stand upon the contrary hypothesis. Let us say that Bretschneider never sent your telegram at all. Clearly, then, somebody else must have done it. But who? That is the question which confronts us now."

"And that question is unanswerable," replied Lancaster.

"You know nobody in Lucerne?" asked the little doctor, sharply.

"Not a soul."

"You have made enquiries at the telegraph-office?"

"Certainly; but could get no information."

"You have no friend who may play a hoax, or enemy who seeks to injure you?"

"Good heavens, no!" exclaimed Lancaster, almost laughing.

"Very well, then," resumed the little man, with an oracular stare through his large spectacles, "I think I have succeeded in clearing the way before you. Bretschneider is evidently not in Lucerne now. You will not find him here, I am pretty sure. He would certainly have been here by now, as you say you yourself arrived two or three days late. Therefore you must change your field of enquiry. You must go to Milan, and if necessary to Bologna."

"I am afraid that's the only thing to be done," replied Lancaster rising.

"Yes, I think I've proved that pretty conclusively," said the little man, in high good-humour with himself. "Believe me, my dear Sir, there's nothing like the exhaustive or eliminative method in these puzzling cases. Dissect, dissect, and again dissect, and then if you don't arrive at the truth you are at any rate getting very near to it. I think I should have made an incomparable detective,—I have such a ve-ry

analytical mind. I should like—ah, so much!—to unravel all those complicated affairs of police which require the peculiar talent I possess. But alas! Instead of detecting criminals all I can do is to detect microbes. Well, goodbye, my dear Sir; and if you find your friend—our friend, I should say—I hope you will write and tell me the solution of the whole mystery."

"Your great kindness to me merits a better return than that," responded Lancaster, who felt really grateful to the good-hearted little doctor in spite of his absurdities. "I will certainly not fail to let you know."

"And you must come and dine with me when you get back!" added Dr. C—, in a final burst of enthusiasm.

Lancaster smilingly waved his hand, and escaped. He had now made up his mind that there was nothing for it but to start in search of Bretschneider at once, as it was clear that something had gone wrong. He

accordingly hurried back to the Schweitzerhof, consulted a time-table, and began to make preparations for departure; wrote a letter to Bretschneider which he left for him at the hotel in case he should turn up subsequently, and decided to take the first train southwards on the following day. After all, a few hours could not make much difference, and there was still something to be seen in Lucerne.

CHAPTER III.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE WOMAN.

THERE is a profound sociological truth in the saying that no man liveth to himself. No man, probably, ever existed whose associates were exactly the same as they would have been had they never been brought into contact with him. Insensibly they were affected, to a greater or more limited degree, by his looks, his words, his gestures, his own particular moral atmosphere ; and when we consider human beings in the aggregate, and think how the influence of one man upon another is transmitted in its turn to others, and that each being is at once the source and the channel

of such influences, crossing and re-crossing without end, we may form some idea of the extent and power of the interaction. And the same may hold good in the sphere of biology. There is a sense in which some men may be said almost to keep other men alive, by sheer dint of moral energy. The influence of the strong man braces the weak one, and, by removing the depression, anxiety, or despair which is undermining his physical constitution, imparts new life and fresh activity to organs enfeebled by mental strain. The power of sympathy is great; for sympathy relieves the weight of burdens too heavy to be borne alone, and the heart's action becomes less laboured, more normal, more natural. Faith in one able and willing to cure, half effects the cure itself; and the patient who, one moment, lies nervous and despairing, with irregular pulse and fevered brain, alone with his sufferings, receives an accession of vitality the moment the door opens and the strong, cheerful, able man

appears who understands his case and undertakes to heal him. Pain itself grows less acute in such a presence; anxiety subsides; the physical conditions become proportionately more favourable to treatment. It seems almost as though these healing men—be they physicians or not—impart some of their own vitality to their feebler brethren; and, like Elisha with the son of the Shunammite, supply from their own powers the life that is needed by another.

The watchful and incessant care exercised by Dr. Lancaster over Mirabel ever since he took up the case, and the marked improvement that had manifested itself in consequence, had of course relieved the sick man's wife of that close attendance upon him which, up till then, had been an imperative necessity. For some weeks past, therefore, she had devoted a considerable portion of her time to her two favourite pursuits of reading and walking; while Mirabel spent

most of his basking in the sunshine, cheerful and contented, never a day passing without a visit from one at least of his two friends Lancaster and Gerard. Now, however, all this was changed. The weather had broken up, and he felt the difference. Instead of sitting in the sunny garden, he was forced to content himself with an indoor life ; his spirits flagged ; there was no Lancaster to come and cheer him with bright, enlivening conversation ; even Gerard, curiously enough, seemed to hold aloof. Under these circumstances it was only natural that his wife should renounce her walks and her studies, and devote herself entirely to his companionship. She now stayed with him morning, noon, and night. She never left him, except for a few minutes at a time. She would sit by him for hours together, and—what struck Mirabel as rather curious—would often keep her eyes fixed upon him with a strange, concentrated expression which made him feel ever so slightly uncomfortable. Some-

times she would take his hand and hold it in hers—still with the same steadfast look; and sometimes she would lay her hand upon his head—which gave him a sensation of cold, and made him shiver very curiously. He often wanted to ask her why she did these things, and what made her look at him with that disconcerting gaze; but somehow, when on the point of doing so, he was kept back by something like a sense of shame—shame at the thought of giving way to what could be nothing more than the morbid fancies of a sick man. Was she not his wife? Was she not devoting herself to him, sacrificing all her own enjoyments to his welfare? Why should he run the risk of paining her by appearing harassed by her affectionate solicitude?

He felt himself growing—ever so slightly—weaker. No doubt the chilly, rainy weather, and the deprivation of those hours spent in the open air, would account for that; and of course the weaker he felt

the more dependent he became on Julia, and the more conscious of her strength. Not that she used it tyrannously; she was always kind enough, in her cold, unimpassioned way; but he knew instinctively that in any case in which there was the slightest difference in their respective wishes, however ready she might appear to accede to his, it was always hers that prevailed. Once or twice, too, a very strange thing happened. It seemed to him that there was something in his wife's eyes that made him drowsy. And the drowsiness he felt was not that calm, luxurious sensation which springs from healthy fatigue; it was rather an unaccountable propensity to close his eyes notwithstanding his own will, a propensity against which it was painful for him to struggle. On one occasion he became thoroughly alarmed. He suddenly found himself lying back in his easy chair by the fireside without any recollection of how he came there. His memory was a complete

blank. Whether he had dropped off to sleep and woke up again, or whether he had been awake all the time, and was now suffering from a momentary confusion of thought arising from physical weakness, he could not tell. All he knew was that something puzzling had happened, and that his wife was standing by his side.

"What is it, Julie? Where have I been?" he asked, confusedly.

"Been? Why, you've been here," she replied, sitting down. "Have you had a pleasant nap?"

"Nap! I haven't been to sleep, have I?" he exclaimed.

"You've been sleeping beautifully," said his wife.

Mirabel was silent for a minute. "But," he said, "I can't have been asleep. I don't remember going to sleep. I never felt sleepy at all. I don't feel, now, like a man that has just woke up. All I know is that I'm awake now, and don't remember any-

thing. I feel as if I had just come into existence from a state of nothingness. Bah! It is horrible! horrible!"

"You slept soundly," replied his wife, with a slight smile curving her lips, "and you have woke up suddenly. That is quite sufficient to account for it all. Don't you feel better for the rest?"

"No," said Mirabel, fretfully. "I feel weak and restless."

This occurred when Lancaster had been gone nearly a week. Two days afterwards Gerard called. It had been a considerable effort to him to remain away so long, especially as he felt sure that Mirabel would like to see him; but he was determined to make an honest struggle against the temptation that was assailing him, and he had, too, an uneasy consciousness that his visits, under the circumstances, were dishonourable. What constituted the fascination of this woman? She was not a loveable creature. She was handsome, certainly, but her beauty was

that cold, bright, hard quality which is of all others least calculated to excite tenderness Perhaps it was that her character presented just those points and features in which Gerard himself was so conspicuously lacking; he found in her that which he did not possess; she was original, unlike other women; and she thus appealed to his imagination more, perhaps, than to his heart. This distinction, however, Gerard failed to make, and he swore to himself that he could never love another woman as he loved her.

She met him in the hall, and, contrary to her usual practice, took him into an unoccupied room instead of that in which her husband was. "We haven't seen you for some days," she said, motioning him to a seat.

"No," replied Gerard, hesitatingly. "I have been—rather busy. How is Mirabel getting on?"

"He has been a little weak for the last day or two," she said, carelessly. "This

change in the weather is trying him, I fancy; he hasn't been able to get out, and of course that makes a difference."

"I am so sorry," said Gerard; "I ought to have come before. I'm afraid you're feeling the confinement to the house too; you must let me relieve you a bit every now and then."

"You are very good," said Madame Mirabel; "but really I am quite equal to all I have to do. My place is with my husband, and I do not care to leave him just now. He is nervous and unstrung, somehow, and seems to depend on me a good deal."

"Is he really worse?" exclaimed Gerard, surprised.

"I shouldn't say that, exactly," she replied; "of course he fluctuates, and I thought he seemed rather weaker this morning than he has been for some time past."

"Have you written to Lancaster about him?" asked Gerard.

"I have no address," she said; "I haven't

heard from Dr. Lancaster yet. I expect to hear soon, though ; and if Gaston shows no signs of improvement in a day or two I shall call in Dr. Charlton."

"I suppose I may see him,' observed Gerard.

Madame Mirabel hesitated. "I think he would like to see you very much," she answered, "but I am not quite sure whether it would be prudent. He is apt to get so excited ; another sign of weakness, I'm afraid."

"I do hope and trust you are not wearing yourself out," said Gerard, anxiously. "Do let me come and sit with him sometimes, if only that you may get a little air and exercise."

"Why should you sacrifice yourself for me ?" she said, a soft look coming into her blue eyes.

"I could not if I tried," he answered, fervently ; "nothing—nothing in the wide world would be a sacrifice if done for your

sake. You know it well enough ; why do you talk to me like that ?"

It was just those rare, brief gleams of tenderness, contrasting so exquisitely with her usual calm reserve, which inflamed poor Gerard's heart almost fatally. His voice trembled with emotion as he spoke. She, on her side, leaned forward in her low chair, and gazed straight into his eyes with a thoughtful, half-enquiring expression.

"Gerard !" suddenly exclaimed a voice.

Both started ; and, looking up, saw Mirabel standing in the doorway. The change in his appearance was marked ; and his haggard, eager face, dishevelled hair, and long, grey dressing-gown startled Gerard almost as though he had seen a ghost.

"Gaston, go back to your room this minute!" cried his wife, rising hastily. "How imprudent of you—you'll catch your death of cold !"

Mirabel hesitated ; he looked for a

moment as though he almost feared her. Then he turned to Gerard, and smiled.

"Why have you not been before?" he asked, excitedly. "I have not seen you for a week. Never mind! You are here now, and that is well. It makes me feel better already. Come, my friend, come with me into the next room. It is cold here. Come, and we will have a nice long chat."

"You're not looking as well as I should like to see you," said Gerard, as they crossed the hall together.

"I do not know—I do not know what it is," answered Mirabel, sinking into his chair. "I feel weak, somehow; I want the good Lancaster with me again." He paused; then, hearing Madame Mirabel's step ascending the staircase, said, half-suspiciously,—

"How long have you been here? Why did you not come in to me at once?"

"Madame Mirabel took me into the other room," replied Gerard. "She seemed almost

afraid you were not well enough to see me to-day."

"She said that?" retorted Mirabel, with a quick raising of the eyebrows. "And what else did she say? Tell me all about it; come!"

"Nothing, I assure you," said the other. "Only that you had seemed a little weaker for the last day or two, in consequence of the weather I suppose. How are you feeling, yourself?"

"I hardly know," said Mirabel; "my spirits seem all to have left me. I suppose I am rather weaker—I must be—for I have strange feelings I cannot describe. There is one most distressing sensation that I am ashamed to tell you. Bah! it is only that I am morbid. But—no, I cannot say it. It is too monstrous. I should deserve to be hanged for it, only that I know it is because I am so weak."

"Never mind; tell me," said Gerard, encouragingly.

"*I am afraid of my wife*," whispered Mirabel.

Gerard did the very best thing possible under the circumstances. He broke into ringing laughter. "Why, Mirabel," he exclaimed, "I wouldn't have believed it of you! Nonsense; you must get over that. It's too absurd altogether. You're hipped, that's all; you miss Lancaster, and you miss the sunshine and the open air, and I'm afraid you've missed me."

"Yes, yes; you are right, you are quite right," assented the other, eagerly. "Of course I know that myself. Julie is the best of wives. It is only because I am not well; sick men's fancies are not to be trusted—they are wild, ridiculous, insane! There, we will not say any more about it. What have you been doing with yourself all this time?"

The two were soon chatting pleasantly together upon indifferent subjects, Mirabel throwing himself into the conversation with almost feverish interest. Once or twice

Gerard thought he heard a stealthy footstep in the hall, and whenever this occurred Mirabel cast a quick, anxious glance in the direction of the door—or Gerard fancied so. They were left undisturbed, however, for about twenty minutes, during which time Mirabel seemed almost like his old self again. The hunted look which had so struck Gerard passed away, and the old cheerfulness once more lighted up his face. Then the door opened, and his wife came in.

"It is still drizzling," she said, as she moved towards them.

"The weather is certainly most detestable," answered Gerard.

"I think the wind has changed," she continued.

"Is it in the East?" asked Mirabel. "I know it is—I feel it, and it makes me shiver."

"You look tired," said his wife; and certainly there was a look of weariness about him which had not been noticeable while he

and Gerard were alone together. "Don't you feel any inclination for a doze?"

"No, no, not in the least," he replied hastily.

"I think you do," she said in a firm, quiet tone.

He threw himself back in his chair, trying to avoid his wife's eye. "I tell you no," he repeated, with a sort of fretful impatience. "I have a horror of going to sleep in the day-time; it always makes me worse."

"My dear Gaston," said Madame Mirabel, "if you will excite yourself in this way I shall have to call in Dr. Charlton."

"I will not see him," exclaimed the invalid. "I want Lancaster again; I don't want any of your Charltons. Gerard does me more good than anybody—and I like to have him come. But a stranger I cannot bear to see."

"Very well, then," rejoined his wife, as though to humour him; "only you must be reasonable, you know, and do what I tell

you. It is all nonsense to say that a nap in the afternoon does you harm; you need it, and your eyes are almost closing now."

Gerard here rose and prepared to go. Mirabel, whose movements were suggestive of growing languor, made a feeble effort to restrain him, but was forced to content himself with the promise of another visit shortly; while Madame Mirabel seemed relieved at his departure. The rain was still falling, and as he tramped homewards over the wide moor he lapsed into rather deep and anxious thought. It seemed undeniable to him that his friend's progress towards recovery had received a check. And not only was his health less satisfactory; a painful change had come over his mind. Before, when he was supposed to be dying, his spirits were always good, his cheerfulness indomitable; now, although his physical condition was still better than it had been then, even allowing for this curious relapse, he was anxious, fretful, nervous, and

full of the most shocking fancies. Afraid of his wife! What clearer proof could there be of impending mental trouble? Afraid of that strong, beautiful, devoted woman, every glance of whose eye, every pressure of whose hand, conveyed a thrill of ecstasy to the favoured recipient—surely, a man must be ill indeed to take up with such delusions. That hunted look—that feverish anxiety for a friendly face—that rebelliousness against her wise suggestion that a little sleep would refresh and strengthen him—all convinced Gerard that poor Mirabel's disorder had taken a new turn, and that for both his sake and his wife's it was most desirable that the absence of Dr. Lancaster should be speedily brought to a close.

His conviction would probably have been deepened could he have witnessed the scene that took place in Dr. Mirabel's bedroom that night. It was wild weather outside; the wind swept tumultuously over the broad expanse of heath, and dashed the rain ever

and anon against the window-panes with a fierce pattering noise, like that of a shower of grapeshot. The fire burnt red and sullen between the bars, leaving the room in semi-darkness; on the sofa lay the sick man, straight and supine, and over him stood his wife. Was he asleep? Scarcely; for every now and then he spoke, and tried apparently, to move; and even when he lay quite still and silent, he did not look as though he were sleeping—rather, indeed, as though he were actually dead. His arms rested against his sides, and his white, thin hands every now and then closed and unclosed themselves with a nervous tremor suggestive of some inward struggle; his eyes were shut, but there was a quivering motion in the eyelids which told of conflict, agony, resistance to some overpowering influence or impulse from without.

The silence, which had lasted for about ten minutes, was now broken. It was his wife who spoke.

"Gaston," she said, "are you asleep?"

He breathed heavily, and made a violent effort to open his eyes.

"Gaston, look at me," she continued.

A contortion passed over his features, accompanied by a convulsive movement of the limbs.

"Gaston," she repeated in a firm tone.

"Let me go!" he cried suddenly. "You suffocate me—you are killing me by inches! Ah, it is horrible, horrible—you send me into the blackness and darkness where it is all nothing—you torture me with fright! Go, I tell you, go—leave me alone, ah, *pour l'amour de Dieu, pour l'amour du bon Dieu!*"

His eyes were open wide enough now, and glared at her with a look of that intense, helpless horror only seen in those who are still under the influence of some frightful nightmare.

"You must not say such things as that," said Madame Mirabel, laying her cold right

hand upon his forehead. "You are very ill. You must do whatever I tell you. When I order you to go to sleep you must do so. Come, shut your eyes at once."

"No! no!" he cried piteously. "I want Lancaster—he would save me. *O mon Dieu,* when will the good Lancaster come back?"

"Dr. Lancaster never did you any good," replied his wife. "It was all your fancy. He could not do you any good if he were here now. You must not think about him any more."

She placed his head, gently but firmly, upon the cushions again, while he gazed at her like a dumb animal at bay. Then she stroked his forehead. Gradually the terrified look died out, and was succeeded by an expression of submissiveness almost amounting to torpor.

"Now listen to me," she resumed. "You are alone with me now, and you depend upon me for everything."

He only moaned.

"You do not want to see Dr. Lancaster any more; he cannot do anything for you."

A faint, fluttering sigh escaped him, and his hands fell lifelessly on either side.

"You have implicit confidence in me; you will do everything I tell you; you cannot live without me; you want me to be with you till you die."

He lay there, passive as a corpse, and made no answer.

"Do you hear me, Gaston?" said his wife.

"I hear you," he said, like a man talking in his sleep.

"You want me to stay with you till you die," she repeated steadily. "Say it!"

"I want you to stay with me till I die," he murmured.

"That is right. And now you are to go to sleep."

She passed her hand once more over his eyes. He was breathing stertorously, and

his mouth twitched once or twice. Then he relapsed into complete unconsciousness, and she stood watching him closely for a minute or two; but he never stirred, and the expression of her face relaxed.

"I think that will do for to-night," she said, as she moved quietly to the fire-place. "Half-past eleven—he shall sleep till about ten in the morning. It's tiresome work; however, it has to be done, so there's no use worrying over it."

Then she began slowly to undress, put on a comfortable *peignoir*, and sat down in front of the fire, gazing into its red hollows thoughtfully. There was no sound from the sofa. The rain still fell, but the wind appeared to have dropped, and everything was silent out of doors. She was the only watcher in that house.

"It's curious I have heard nothing yet," she murmured, resuming the thread of her meditations. "He must have got there days ago. I wonder what he did when he

discovered—Good heavens! Can he be on his way back?"

A warm flush suddenly suffused her face, and for a moment she looked disturbed—nay, actually alarmed.

"Well, whatever he did, I can do nothing more. It was a bold stroke—a wonderful inspiration. And yet how simple! Poor Gaston—I don't think he suffers much. He will have forgotten all about it when he wakes. I only wish I could keep that Palliser boy away from him. I foresee a little embarrassment from that youth."

Then a smile broke out. "To think of the foolish creature fancying himself in love with me! Still, it gives me a hold over him; a weakness of that sort is always a weapon in one's hand. Well, it's growing late. I think I'll go to bed."

She threw a rug over her husband's feet and legs; looked searchingly at him for a few minutes, much as an experimenter might look at the materials he had prepared for

the observation of some interesting scientific process, to see that the conditions continued favourable; then raked the fire together, and stepped composedly between the sheets. Some people think that there is no better provocative of sleep than a good conscience. Madame Mirabel soon slept as soundly and as peacefully as an infant; but whether that was due to an untroubled moral sense, or to the absence of any moral sense at all, is a question we need not dwell upon at present. We may be very sure that Madame Mirabel herself never vexed her head about the matter.

The next morning Mirabel awoke much weaker. He was calm, however, and did not seem to have any recollection of what had passed during the night, beyond a confused sense of some vaguely distressing dream. His wife tended him with her usual jealous care.

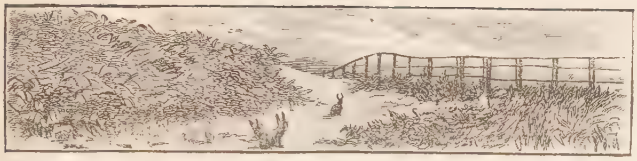
In the afternoon she wrote two letters. One was to Gerard, to the effect that, as she

was getting rather uneasy about her husband's increasing weakness, she had decided to ask Dr. Charlton to come and look at him. The other was to Dr. Charlton himself.

And now the entire neighbourhood began to sympathise with her. Her constancy and devotion under this new trial were pronounced worthy of all praise, all sympathy. The general impression was that Dr. Mirabel's relapse had set in before the departure of Dr. Lancaster, and it was therefore no more than natural that the latter should incur a certain amount of censure. Mrs. Palliser averred that she had never heard anything like it since she was born, while her husband gave utterance to the oracular opinion that the whole thing looked very queer; he supposed that Lancaster knew what he was about, but for his part he thought such conduct stood very much in need of explanation. All this distressed Gerard considerably. He was now getting seriously anxious about Mirabel, and although, knowing the

circumstances of Lancaster's departure, he defended the absent man, he wondered greatly how it was that nothing had yet been heard from him. Never had he known a doctor more able, more assiduous, more conscientious in the treatment of his patients; the fact of his absence was unfortunate, merely, considering the turn that things had taken, but what was to be said of his long silence? Charlton, who was a respectable but somewhat talkative man, did much to foment public interest in the affair. The patient, he told everybody, seemed dying of weakness. It was no longer, apparently, a case of tuberculosis. It was rather a general prostration, a failure of the vital powers, a creeping insidious decay of the entire system, which baffled all human skill. Of course it would be most satisfactory if Lancaster could be recalled, but personally he did not believe that Lancaster or anybody else would be able to relieve the sufferer. Besides, who could do more for

him than his practical, cool-headed, and most admirably devoted wife? Even the servants, who idolised Mirabel and treated their mistress with the coldest civility and respect, could not withhold their admiration of her unwearied goodness to him. And thus it was that Madame Mirabel soon became quite popular, while Lancaster was blamed for his indifference, and Mirabel himself, secluded from the public gaze, lay dying slowly in secret.



CHAPTER IV.

MADAME MIRABEL SEEKS ADVICE.

IT was at breakfast time, two or three days later, that Madame Mirabel received her long-expected letter from Dr. Lancaster. A gleam of excitement came into her eyes as she found it lying beside her plate, and she opened it with a beating heart. As she read it, however, her agitation decreased, and, putting it down with a expression of satisfaction and relief, she drank her coffee eagerly.

"So far so good," she remarked, comfortably. "Nothing could have turned out better." A couple of fine fresh eggs, and a beautiful pink rasher grilled to a turn,

seemed to complete her contentment, and she ate and drank with unusual relish. She was by no means a woman who despised the luxuries of the table, but a healthy creature with a strong will, an excellent digestion, and a capital appetite which she never had any scruples in gratifying; and on this particular morning she seemed to enjoy her breakfast hugely. Then she took up the letter and glanced over it once more.

"Monday evening!" she exclaimed, as her eye fell upon the date. "To-day is Saturday. What in the world can have happened? Why has it been so long upon the road?"

She turned over the envelope and examined the post-mark. It had been posted at Bellinzona.

A burst of delighted laughter came from her beautiful lips. "Bellinzona!" she cried under her breath. "How like him—to write a letter, put it in his pocket, forget all about it, and then find it by accident three days

afterwards! It almost tempts one to believe in an over-ruling Providence."

Her explanation of the delay was, we are bound to confess, the true one. Lancaster had hastily slipped the letter into his inner breast-pocket, intending to post it when he went out after breakfast the day succeeding his arrival; but, as we know, his mind was then entirely taken up with the problem of Dr. Bretschneider's non-appearance, and he forgot all about the letter from that moment. He only discovered it, in fact, when approaching the frontier two days afterwards, and was terribly annoyed at his own carelessness; still, he had no reason to anticipate any serious consequences from the oversight, and contented himself with posting it at the next station.

Madame Mirabel waited in all that morning to see whether Gerard would call. He had only been once since the last occasion we described, and had not been allowed to see Mirabel for more than a few moments.

Finding he did not appear, she took a light lunch at half-past one, and then dressed herself in a very quiet walking-costume, selecting the darkest colours she possessed. There was a great deal of art exercised in her toilet on this occasion, admirably adapted for the purpose that she had in hand. All the aggressive stylishness which so irritated most of her neighbours disappeared as though by magic. Nothing could have been plainer, simpler, or less obtrusive than her appearance; even the bright colour seemed to have faded from her cheeks, and she looked almost pathetically sedate.

After giving a few orders to one of the servants, she left the house, walking slowly in the direction of the Pallisers'. A slight improvement had taken place in the weather, and the day, though gray and chilly, was dry and not unpleasant. After her long confinement to the sick room the fresh air and exercise she was now enjoying were delightful, and for a moment she felt almost

tempted to prolong her walk. But she was not a woman to let pleasure interfere with business.

Mrs. Palliser was sitting alone by the fireside when Madame Mirabel was announced, reading a religious novel. The good lady had a decided weakness for this form of literature; it gratified her love of imagination and her instinctive piety at the same time. She quickly put down her book, however, as her visitor was shown in, and greeted her with something like effusiveness.

"My dear Madame Mirabel, I am quite delighted to see you," she exclaimed, as the slim, plainly-clad form of that lady advanced gracefully into the room. "Take this low chair near the fire; it's a cold day, though I dare say you don't feel it quite so much as I do—I have such a wretched circulation. I've been so anxious about you lately, and I should have come and seen you, only as I dare say you know we've had our own

troubles too, and my husband and I have both been laid up with colds."

"Oh, thank you—I know how good you are," replied Madame Mirabel, sinking into the seat assigned her. "Yes, I suppose most people have had colds lately—the weather has really been most trying. I hope you and Mr. Palliser are better?"

"Yes,—rather better, thank you," replied Mrs. Palliser, "though it is very difficult to shake off these little ailments when one comes to our time of life. And then, you know, we've been so dreadfully upset lately. You must have heard, of course, about poor dear old Mrs. Palliser. I think you met her here, once, didn't you? It was a terrible shock to us all."

"Ah yes, indeed," murmured Madame Mirabel, softly. "It must have been most distressing. What a sprightly, clever old lady she was! I remember being greatly struck with her. How has she been since?"

"Oh, there's very little change," answered

Mrs. Palliser, shaking her head. "She seems very feeble, and there is no hope that she will ever be permanently better. Her poor mind has completely gone. Still, she is quite quiet, I'm thankful to say, and doesn't talk in the frightful way she did at first. I can't *tell* you what it was like! I assure you, dear Madame Mirabel, the day she was taken—the day she lost her reason, you know—she made my blood run cold. I had never seen anything like it before, and it made me feel as though I were going mad myself."

"I can quite understand that, and I can't tell you how much I sympathised with you when I heard of it," said Madame Mirabel. "Still, so long as she doesn't suffer, there is cause for thankfulness. I often think that there are scarcely any troubles which are wholly without alleviations, if one only knows where to look for them."

"Most true—most true indeed," assented Mrs. Palliser fervently. Then she thought

to herself, "How cruelly I must have misjudged this poor woman! Evidently she has a fund of goodness in her, and her own heavy troubles have been the blessed means of bringing it all out."

Just then the door opened, and Mr. Palliser came in. He looked worn and anxious, but brightened visibly at the sight of Madame Mirabel, to whom he extended a very courteous and hearty welcome.

"And what's all this we hear about your husband?" he asked in his kind, genial way, as he sat down. "What's the reason that Lancaster went away so suddenly, and how is it he never writes?"

Madame Mirabel hesitated a moment. "The fact is, dear Mr. Palliser," she said at last, "I have taken a very great liberty with you both. But you have always been so kind to me—and I am so sorely in need of advice just now—that—that I thought I couldn't do better than come"—

"My dear lady," exclaimed the good

gentleman, "don't talk nonsense about taking a liberty, pray. We've often thought about you and spoken of you, and wondered whether we couldn't help you in any way, but we never knew exactly how. What is the trouble? Tell us all about it, and let's see if something can't be done."

Thus urged, Madame Mirabel coughed a little, looked nervously at the fire, and then prepared to speak. "I was sure you would be kind to me," she said, with a faint smile upon her lips, "and it will be a great comfort to me to tell you all about it. I am afraid that poor Dr. Lancaster has come in for a good deal of censure lately. But honestly I don't think he deserves it. He was summoned to a medical conference at Lucerne, you know, and really he could scarcely help himself. And Gaston—my husband—was so much better, and seemed to be gaining strength so steadily, that there appeared no solid reason why Dr. Lancaster shouldn't go. I'm convinced he would never have gone if

he had thought there was the slightest risk."

"H'm," muttered Mr. Palliser, dubiously.

"I know it struck *me* as being the most extraordinary thing I had ever heard of in my life," remarked his wife.

"No, I think all that was a misapprehension," said Madame Mirabel, very gently. "I am sure that much that has been said about him is unjust. However, a few days after his departure my husband seemed not quite so well. His appetite fell off, and he got weaker, and once or twice he complained of distressing dreams; and of course all this made me very anxious. At last I decided upon calling in Dr. Charlton; very reluctantly, I confess, because poor Gaston opposed the idea so strongly—you know what sick men's fancies are, don't you, dear Mrs. Palliser? but I judged it best eventually, and he has attended him ever since last Wednesday, though I am very much afraid he has not done him any good."

"How sad, to be sure! Oh, you poor thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, sympathetically.

"But why didn't you write to Lancaster?" asked her husband.

"I am just coming to that," replied Madame Mirabel, in the same low tones. "You must remember that for several days after Gaston had begun to get weaker I was not seriously alarmed. I put it down to the break-up of the weather, and the natural fluctuations which occur in cases such as his. Eventually I did get anxious, and wanted to write; but most unfortunately I had no address, and was forced to wait until I heard from Dr. Lancaster himself. You may conceive my state of mind! Day after day passed, and I got no letter. Well"—

"It's perfectly scandalous! scandalous!" interrupted Mr. Palliser in an indignant burst.

"I never heard of such abominable be-

haviour since I was born!" chimed in his wife.

"Indeed, indeed you are mistaken," said Madame Mirabel earnestly. "Of course *I* thought it was very unaccountable at first; but it turns out that we have all been the victims of circumstances. I heard from Dr. Lancaster this morning, and I've brought the letter for you to see. He was detained for three days in Paris by indisposition, and when he arrived at Lucerne he was unable to find the friend he had gone to visit—in fact there seems to have been some most unfortunate accident, or misunderstanding, which still remains to be explained. Then he wrote to me, but apparently forgot to post the letter! And now," she added with a slight but most effective tremor in her voice, "he has started for Italy. What in the world am I to do?"

By this time she had taken Lancaster's letter from her pocket, and was holding it out to Mr. Palliser. The good gentleman,

looking very stern, knitted his brows into a judicial frown, and, adjusting his eye-glasses, read it aloud for the benefit of his wife. "H'm!" he muttered. "It certainly is a must unlucky business, and I can't think that Lancaster is entirely devoid of blame. How does it strike you?"—turning to Mrs. Palliser.

"It is all a most terrible muddle," she replied, shaking her head from side to side despairingly. "I think, in the first place, he should have written to you from Paris; I think it was abominably careless of him not to have posted his letter at once when he did write; and I think he had no business to go flying off to Milan like that. It seems to me that a medical man's proper place is with his patients; he has no right to put himself out of their reach as Dr. Lancaster has done. And then what's all this about not being able to find the man who telegraphed to him?"

"Ay, what about that?" put in Mr.

Palliser. "I confess I don't understand it; it's a queer business altogether—a mighty queer business. If the other man wasn't to be found, why didn't he come back at once?"

"I suppose he never dreamt he would be wanted," replied Madame Mirabel, sadly. "Of course it is all most inexplicable—I mean, that Dr. Bretschneider should have taken the trouble to summon him to Lucerne by wire, and then never be there to meet him. And you see he isn't even sure that he may find him in Milan. As you say, it is a terrible muddle; and really I am quite uncertain what I ought to do."

"Telegraph for him at once!" exclaimed Mr. Palliser.

"Without losing another moment!" cried his wife.

"I did think of that," said Madame Mirabel, nervously, "but when it came to the point my courage failed. It seemed to me such a responsibility—suddenly to

summon a professional man back from the south of Europe, where he has gone on a scientific mission, on what after all *may* be insufficient grounds. I have done everything he told me to,—even called in Dr. Charlton—and—well, I don't know what more I can do, except write to him, of course. One trouble is that Gaston doesn't like Dr. Charlton, and won't believe that he can do him any good."

"I certainly think Lancaster should be communicated with somehow," remarked Mr. Palliser.

"I wish *I* could get hold of him for a moment," exclaimed his wife.

"Of course," resumed the worthy gentleman, "I quite enter into your feelings about upsetting all his plans, and so on, but still you know, when it's a question of life and death"—

"Life and death!" cried Madame Mirabel, with a start that would have increased the reputation of Sarah Bernhardt. The sudden

look of horrified amazement in her wonderful blue eyes, the cry from her parted, tremulous lips, the instinctive clasping of her hands as she turned towards the speaker and threw her head ever so slightly back, were all perfect. Art could go no higher; the whole thing was a flash of the very purest genius.

"We thought—we heard, you know, dear Madame Mirabel," began Mrs. Palliser, hesitatingly.

"Oh, don't say so, don't say so, I entreat you!" she exclaimed in piteous tones. "It is not so bad as that—indeed it isn't; if there were really any danger, I am sure I should have found it out. No, I don't think I could have been deceived. Gaston is weaker, I know, and I have been very anxious about him; but he is not dying—he can't be—it would be too dreadful if he were!"

"H'm," said Mr. Palliser once more. "Well, then, I'll tell you what my advice is. See Charlton, and get him to write to Lan-

caster at once; and write yourself too. Tell him everything, and then leave the result with him. If, on getting your letter, he thinks his presence here imperatively necessary, you may be sure he'll come back without delay; if not, he'll tell you what to do yourself, and send fresh instructions to Charlton. So I think you may make your mind easy. What do *you* say?" turning for confirmation to his wife.

"You're perfectly right, Marmaduke," replied that authority with a decided air. "I think you've hit on just the proper course. It is exactly what I should have suggested myself. I'm so glad you came and confided in us, Madame Mirabel; two heads are always better than one, aren't they? Oh, I am sure my husband is right. And now let's have some tea."

"I am infinitely grateful to you," said Madame Mirabel, with a faint smile which struck her warm-hearted hostess as pathetic in the extreme. "I will follow your instruc-

tions to the letter, and write to Dr. Lancaster this evening."

Then, with unerring tact, she gradually led the conversation into other channels, sipping her tea with the prettiest possible air of revived confidence and ease. And truly she had reason to be satisfied. Everything had gone off to perfection. She had made firm friends of the Pallisers, she had told them her story with complete success, she had actually shown them Dr. Lancaster's own letter, she had procured from them the very advice she wanted, and she had made it impossible for the worst gossip in the place to criticise her on the ground either of neglecting her husband's interests or keeping her own difficulties a secret. Yes, she had done well, and she felt honestly pleased with herself. The only point in which she had failed—and always would fail—was in her inability to cry at will. Most women, of course, have the power, but this poor lady's lachrymal glands were obstinate, and refused

to work; do what she would, she always found it impossible to force out that one big, bright drop which her artistic instincts told her was wanted as a finishing touch to her otherwise faultless impersonations, and she had been painfully conscious of her deficiency on this occasion. Yet in spite of this drawback, she had achieved a signal triumph, and the pleasure the thought gave her lent an additional relish to her tea and toast.

"Your son has been so good to us," she said, as she played listlessly with her cup.

"Gerard? Dear boy—well, I'm glad to hear it," said Mrs. Palliser. "Yes, I know he is with you a good deal."

"I wish I could get him something to do," muttered his father, with a preoccupied look. "It's high time he made a start."

"No doubt," returned Madame Mirabel, thoughtfully. "In what direction do you think he would find the most suitable opening?"

"Well—I scarcely know," answered Mr.

Palliser. "I had a splendid thing in view for him some time ago,—a position in which he would have made thousands of pounds a year—but that—er—is in abeyance for the present. He might do well upon the Stock Exchange; only things are so queer just now in the City. I should like him, if possible, to get appointed Manager or Secretary to some first-class company; I've a good many influential friends on Directorates, and that sort of thing—or he might make his mark in diplomacy, or some other department of the Government. But I can't see my way just now as clearly as I could wish."

Madame Mirabel opened her eyes rather wide at these somewhat magnificent aspirations, but contented herself with remarking that she thought he would do best in literature.

"Yes, no doubt, if he could only find a publisher who could give him good prices for his books," assented Mr. Palliser. "But I've no idea of the boy drudging as a sort of

hack. He's got brains enough; what he wants is an opening, so as to make a comfortable income from the first."

Madame Mirabel murmured a sympathetic assent, and then produced that indescribable rustling sound by which ladies habitually intimate that they are about to make a move.

"Well, I must be going now," she said, beginning to draw on her gloves. "Give him my kind regards, will you, please? And again let me thank you for your infinite goodness to me to-day. You have taken the greatest load off my mind."

"We've done nothing—absolutely nothing," responded Mr. Palliser, genially. "A little friendly advice—that's all. Don't forget to let us know how matters are going with you."

"And anything else we can do for you, dear Madame Mirabel,"—added Mrs. Palliser, as she effusively shook hands. "Tell your dear husband how much we think of

him, and how anxious we shall be to hear that he is better."

"You'll probably hear from Lancaster again before your own letter reaches him," said Mr. Palliser, as he accompanied her to the door. And then away she went.

"Rum start this, isn't it?" said the worthy gentleman, as he rejoined his wife in the drawing-room. "I don't understand Lancaster leaving everything at loose ends like that at all."

"I don't understand it either," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser. "There's something we haven't got to the bottom of in this business, you may depend upon it. And O, my dear, I do think that we've misjudged that poor woman all along. How nice and simple she was to-day! So different from what I've always imagined her. Just think what her anxiety must have been!"

"I don't think *I* was ever prejudiced against her, my dear," replied Mr. Palliser. "In fact, if I am not mistaken, it has gene-

rally fallen to my lot to defend her against other people's prejudices." Whereupon his wife picked up her shawl, which had fallen unheeded on the ground, poked the fire with somewhat unnecessary vigour, and was soon once more deep in her religious novel.

Madame Mirabel did not hurry home. The fresh air was so grateful to her that she prolonged her walk a little, and it was nearly five o'clock when she reached her house. All was quiet. Then she went up-stairs to her husband's room, and remained there for the best part of an hour. What she did there is not for us to say. No sound escaped through the locked door, and the servants were not inquisitive. About a quarter to six she came down again, and rang the bell.

"I shall want you to take a couple of letters to the post after dinner this evening, Susan," she said, opening her desk and arranging her writing-materials.

"Yes, ma'am," said the servant.

"How has your master been this afternoon?" asked Madame Mirabel, in her usual impassive tones.

"Much the same, ma'am," replied the girl. "I went up once to see if he wanted anything, and he didn't take any notice of me."

"Was he asleep?" asked her mistress.

"I couldn't rightly say, ma'am," replied Susan. "His eyes were shut at first, but he opened them a minute or two afterwards, though he didn't look as if he saw me—there was a blind look about them, somehow."

"Ah!" said Madame Mirabel. "I am feeling very anxious about your master, Susan, and I'm going to write to Dr. Lancaster. I should have written before, only I had no address until this morning."

"Oh, ma'am, I do wish the doctor would come back!" cried the girl impulsively. "The master's never been the same since he went away. Is he likely to be back before long, do you know, ma'am?"

"We'll hope so; but at present he is in Italy," replied Madame Mirabel. "There, go and tell cook to get dinner ready as quickly as she can; I shall have finished my letters by the time she sends it up, and then you can take them to the post."

Exit Susan, with much sympathy and admiration for her mistress in her honest unsuspecting heart. Madame Mirabel was not in the habit of speaking unnecessarily to the servants, and this unwonted confidence on her part had a great effect on Susan. Then she wrote to Dr. Lancaster as follows:

"Gorse Cottage,
"Saturday.

"DEAR DR. LANCASTER,

"I was glad to get your letter this morning, as I had been hoping to hear from you for some days. It is very strange that you should have failed to find Dr. Bretschneider at Lucerne. What can be the reason? I can only hope that you have discovered his whereabouts ere this, and that the mystery which has been puzzling you is now cleared up.

"Gaston has not been as well as I could wish. He has no cough, but suffers from great prostration, as well as extreme lowness of spirits. This has made me very

anxious, and I have often wished that you were not away. I have also been much annoyed at the exaggerated reports of his condition that have been spread by Dr. Charlton. I have not very much confidence in Dr. Charlton myself, for I am sure he does not understand the case; and I should feel much happier if you would write and let me know what I had better do. Perhaps you would send a line to Dr. Charlton too. Meantime I am asking him to let you know his own opinion; you can take it for what it is worth.

"When shall we see you back? I trust you are having a pleasant holiday, and—what I know would gratify you more than anything—that the great Mattei problem is in course of being solved.

"Gaston joins me in kindest regards.

"Ever yours sincerely,

"JULIA MIRABEL."

"There," she said to herself, as she folded the letter, "I don't think that could be improved upon. Charlton's report will of course be very much more alarming; but I'll take care it doesn't reach him too soon." Then she took another sheet of paper and prepared to write again.

"DEAR DR. CHARLTON,

"I think it would be as well if, in view of my husband's continued weakness, you were to let Dr. Lan-

caster know your opinion of his case. I am aware, of course, that you do not believe Dr. Lancaster could do very much for him, and I trust you will not regard my proposal as evincing any want of confidence in your skill; but seeing that Dr. Lancaster had the case in hand for several months before he went away, I should feel more comfortable if he were kept *au courant* with it during his absence. His address is the Schweitzerhof, Lucerne.

"Yours very truly,

"JULIA MIRABEL.

"Saturday."

"He's not likely to show *that* to Lancaster, anyhow," she said, with a slight smile, as she addressed the envelope. She took the two letters in her hand, and rang the bell; then a thought struck her, and she put the second one aside.

"Bring dinner, and then take this to the post," she said to the servant, giving her the letter for Lancaster. "Never mind about the other; to-morrow morning will be time enough for that."

She dined comfortably on a plate of strong, clear soup, a plump little bird beautifully toasted, a delicate batter-pudding with

white-wine sauce, a cream cheese, and a few glasses of good claret; which helped to make her feel at peace with herself and all the world. People had told her once or twice that she really ought to keep up her strength, and she acted upon the advice. Then she put her feet upon the fender, and, taking up a French review, was soon absorbed in an article by an eminent scientist of the Nancy school upon the latest development of therapeutic hypnotism; a subject which appeared to have a singular fascination for her, for she read on and on with concentrated attention for nearly a couple of hours, making careful notes every now and then. At last the clock upon the mantelpiece chimed nine o'clock.

"I had better go up now, I suppose," she said, rising slowly from her chair. "I haven't done a bad day's work—but it isn't quite finished yet. How ghastly he looked this evening! It can scarcely last much longer, I should think."

Then she put out the gas, saw that the windows were securely fastened, stole cautiously upstairs with silent footsteps, and entered the fatal room.

CHAPTER V.

VICTORY.

GERARD was both surprised and pleased to hear, at dinner that evening, that Madame Mirabel had called; still more to find that she had created so favourable an impression upon his mother. He looked, however, much concerned on learning how matters stood respecting Dr. Lancaster. He was far from blaming the doctor for neglect or carelessness, seeing at once that the present difficulty had been brought about by circumstances beyond foresight or control; at the same time he fully recognised the gravity of the actual position, and felt more than

ever convinced that Lancaster's immediate return was an affair of the most urgent necessity.

"Yes, indeed, we must all feel that," said Mrs. Palliser; "and yet, though of course poor Madame Mirabel is most cruelly anxious, she does not seem to expect any immediate danger. You saw how startled and horrified she was, Marmaduke, when you spoke of it as a question of life and death."

"I'm almost afraid she doesn't realise how ill Mirabel is," observed Gerard.

"What was he like when you saw him last?" enquired Mr. Palliser.

"I only saw him for a minute or two," replied Gerard, moodily. "And he looked horrible. His face was white and drawn, his nose pinched, and his eyes—well, I can scarcely describe them—fixed and hollow, with an expression in them that reminded me of a dog being vivisected under curare: that drug, you know, which prevents people

crying out. I didn't like the look of him at all, I can tell you."

"My dear Gerard!" exclaimed his mother. "What a dreadful thing!"

"Did he speak to you?" asked Mr. Palliser.

"He tried to," answered Gerard, "but I couldn't make out what he said. He seemed either to be wandering, or else not to have the power of pronouncing the words he wanted to. I think he recognised me."

"Do you mean to say he's in such a state as *that?*" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, horrified.

"He was when I saw him," said Gerard, "and his wife told me it was the effect of some sleeping-draught that Charlton was giving him, and would soon pass away. But I tell you that his appearance gave me a turn that I shan't soon forget."

"What an awful thing for that poor woman!" cried Mrs. Palliser.

"I believe the truth is that Charlton's making a fatal mess of the whole case," said

her husband. "I don't believe he understands it one bit."

"The wonder to me is that Madame Mirabel keeps up as she does," said Mrs. Palliser. "I should have broken down long ago, I'm sure."

"It's all so sudden," remarked Gerard, knitting his brows. "The man's whole system seems to have collapsed. He'd been just a trifle under the weather for a day or two before Lancaster left,—at least so it struck me—in consequence of the sudden change I fancy; and ever since then he's been going down hill with the most frightful rapidity. In fact, as I said just now, I don't believe his wife has any idea how ill he really is."

"It is perfectly unaccountable," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser. "Do, dear Gerard, go and enquire after him to-morrow or on Monday. I shan't be happy till I hear that there's some chance of Dr. Lancaster coming back; I don't know why, but I've a sort of

instinctive feeling that he is the only man who can save that poor creature's life—he seemed to do such wonders for him as long as he was here."

Gerard promised readily enough, and decided to walk over the following afternoon. The day, however, turned out wet, and about three o'clock the rain descended in such floods that it was impossible for any one to venture out of doors. A storm of wind, too, arose, which created immense havoc among the firs—no uncommon occurrence upon the breezy uplands of that neighbourhood,—and the projected visit had to be given up. On Monday there was a lull; and Gerard took immediate advantage of it.

He reached Gorse Cottage about eleven o'clock, and enquired for Madame Mirabel. Again she met him in the hall; again she took him into an unoccupied room where there was no fire.

"I am glad you have called," she said,

without asking him, however, to be seated. "You know I went to see your parents the day before yesterday; I can't tell you how kind they were to me. I suppose they told you everything."

"About Lancaster, you mean?" said Gerard.

"Yes," assented Madame Mirabel. "Well, I've just had another letter from him, written at Milan—you know he went to Milan to see if he could find this Bretschneider person who seems to have behaved so strangely. He very soon discovered the hotel where he had been staying, and was told that just ten days previously he had left for Bologna, giving directions that any letters which came for him were to be forwarded to the address of a Dr. Semenza—one of the surgeons, evidently, who were to have taken part in this conference. And so, now, off he's gone again, and of course there's no knowing when he will come back."

"That's bad," said Gerard, looking much

concerned. "You had written to him before, hadn't you?"

"Oh yes—I wrote on Saturday night, as soon as I got his first letter," she replied. "I addressed it to Lucerne."

"I know what I should do," said Gerard, after a moment's thought. "I should telegraph to him at once."

Madame Mirabel knitted her brows. "Your father suggested that," she said; "but afterwards he seemed to think it would be rather too great a responsibility to call him back from such a distance without the most urgent necessity. I don't quite know what I ought to do. You see, I have written to him—and Dr. Charlton has written too—at least I've asked him to, and no doubt he will; but if you really think it would be better to telegraph"—

"I do indeed, if only for your own sake," interrupted Gerard. "You have borne up wonderfully hitherto, but I'm sure you won't be able to stand the strain much longer.

Send him a wire now—I'll take it to the telegraph-office on my way back."

"You are kindness itself," said Madame Mirabel, with a faint, pathetic smile. "Well, I'll tell you what; I expect Dr. Charlton will be here this afternoon, and I'll ask him what he thinks. If he advises me to recall Dr. Lancaster, I will do so. After all, it might be the wiser plan."

"I am sure of it," said Gerard, earnestly.

"Yes," she said. "And now I must go up to my husband. You'll give my kindest regards to your father and mother, won't you?"

"Certainly," he replied. "I think they'll be glad to hear that you have decided to telegraph. Is there any change?"

Madame Mirabel shook her head. "No—he is still lamentably weak, and passes all the time in a sort of doze. Really it looks as if what Dr. Lancaster always said was true—that vitality is subject to tides. The flood set in some weeks ago, and he recovered

his strength amazingly; now the ebb has come, and what the end of it will be I don't know, I can only hope. Dr. Lancaster himself used to say that *he* had done nothing —it was simply a natural process independent of external influences, so perhaps he wouldn't be able to do anything even if he did come back."

Then Gerard took his leave, and comforted the anxieties of his good parents with the assurance that Madame Mirabel had virtually made up her mind to summon Lancaster at once. As soon as his back was turned, she went slowly and thoughtfully upstairs and entered her husband's room.

"I knew I should have some trouble with that Palliser boy," she said to herself. "It may be necessary to telegraph after all; it would scarcely do to stand out altogether. I wonder how soon it would be *safe?*"

She bent over the prostrate form of the once bright, happy Mirabel—now a helpless,

tortured, dying man. She put her ear to his heart, and listened critically to its throbs; she felt his irregular and feeble pulse, and looked into his dreadful eyes, and noted the faint, convulsive twitching of his thin hands. "I almost think I might venture," she whispered softly. "Another day of this, and then—why, that would make at least three days before he could arrive—I almost think I might!"

She sat down on a large rocking-chair near the bed, and began to rock herself gently to and fro. "I'm not at all sure," she continued reflectively, "that it wouldn't be the wiser plan. I don't believe it *would* do, now I come to think of it, for him to die before Lancaster comes back. He has sunk so much more rapidly than I calculated. I don't believe that any human power could now call him back to life."

A strange sound—half moan, half croak—came from the bed. She rose, and put her face close to his.

"Am I dead yet?" he gasped, in a hoarse whisper.

"Not yet; you are dying," she answered.

He made a feeble effort to twist his head further away from her, with a look of agony. Very slowly, very gently, she laid her hand upon his eyes, and closed them. He made no further sound, but lay as rigid and as motionless and as insensible as though the release had actually come. And then she went downstairs.

That evening she sent a little note to Mrs. Palliser. Dr. Charlton had called during the afternoon, she said, and she had asked him whether it would be any use to telegraph to Dr. Lancaster as proposed. The result, however, had been most unfortunate. It might have been her fancy—she was rather over-wrought, so perhaps was a little hyper-sensitive—but it did seem to her as though Dr. Charlton was just a trifle affronted at the suggestion; he had said that of course she must do as she pleased,

but that he for one did not believe that Dr. Lancaster or anybody else could do anything for Gaston at all! It seemed such a cruel thing to say; but perhaps it was only a little outburst of professional jealousy —Madame Mirabel hoped that it was no more than that; however, she was now convinced that Charlton was no longer to be trusted, and she had therefore decided to telegraph to Dr. Lancaster at once.

"Thank God!" exclaimed good Mrs. Palliser, as she folded up the letter. "She has done a wise thing at last. I only hope to mercy that he won't lose any time."

* * * * *

People often complain, when suffering from suspense, of the extreme slowness with which time passes. It is only, however, where the expected event is certain, or almost certain, to happen at a definite day or hour that the intervening period seems so unduly and so abnormally prolonged. In cases where such an event—the arrival, say, of a person

anxiously and ardently awaited—may take place any moment, and yet where the moments pass, and then the hours, and afterwards perhaps the days, and still he never comes—with what cruel rapidity time flies! Eleven o'clock already? He should have been here at nine. Half-past eleven? It seems but five minutes since the hour struck. To-morrow will be the thirteenth; surely he might have reached us two days ago! And as long as he comes not, the moments and the hours and the days seem to fly past with unnatural and relentless speed, until at last we begin to despair that he will ever come back at all.

The condition of Mirabel, and the chances that Lancaster would return in time to save his life, were now the general topic of conversation. Even those who had hitherto looked most coldly upon the young couple, and said the unkindest things about them, found it impossible to resist the contagion of interest and sympathy. Cards were left

almost daily at the house, accompanied by enquiries and expressions of condolence. Madame Mirabel saw no one; but the servant was deputed to give her mistress's kind love, and to say that there was no improvement. Had any reply been received from Dr. Lancaster?—was now the question of the hour, and as far as could be ascertained nothing had been heard. But surely, as Mrs. Fullerton observed in discussing the matter with the rector's wife, the doctor himself must arrive in the course of a day or two, for Mr. Palliser, who knew all about it, had assured her that the telegram had been sent on Monday. The calculation, however, was wrong, for the simple reason that the telegram had not been sent till Tuesday afternoon; a fact which was unknown to Mrs. Palliser, who had formed too hasty a conclusion from what Madame Mirabel had written.

The appearance of Gorse Cottage, all the blinds of which were carefully pulled down,

had in itself a sort of mysterious fascination for passers-by. What was really the matter with the secluded man? What was going on behind those shrouded windows? A vague though unmistakeable feeling of wonder and curiosity, not unmixed with awe, gradually spread abroad. People found themselves almost inclined to shudder, sometimes, as they passed; the whole thing was so strange, so inexplicable, and so very, very sad. The only person who was at all in a position to elucidate the mystery was Dr. Charlton, and he reaped the benefit accordingly. Never had the ladies of the neighbourhood been so unanimous in feeling ever so slightly unwell. Colds, headaches, little attacks of indigestion and menaces of influenza seemed to spring up on all hands, and Dr. Charlton was overwhelmed with little notes requesting him to call. But all he was in a position to say rather whetted the public curiosity than satisfied it. The young Frenchman, he averred, was dying of

weakness, of want of vitality; there seemed to be some hidden mischief at work which neither he nor any other doctor could detect, which was draining and sapping the man's life. Lancaster? By all means let Lancaster be recalled; but it would be entirely useless, as far as any chance of saving the patient was concerned. To all intents and purposes Mirabel was already dead. He had no longer any power of assimilation; his heart was labouring, incapable of performing its proper functions; the blood was in a fair way to stagnate in his veins; the brain was torpid, the entire nervous system a complete wreck. Lancaster, said Dr. Charlton, could no more bring the man back to life than he could rebuild a house that had fallen down. At the same time, added the doctor, the return of Lancaster was desirable, as he might be able to throw some light upon the origin of Mirabel's collapse, which, as far as he could see, was at present an impenetrable mystery.

On the Thursday morning, the rector and his wife called at Gorse Cottage to make enquiries. Madame Mirabel happened to see them from the first-floor landing, and immediately came down. This was the one exception that she made, and she had her reasons for it.

"Ah, I am so glad to have caught you," she said, as she ushered them into the drawing-room. "I've not been able to see anybody else. It is so good of you to come to me—so very, very good."

She looked white and worn. Mrs. Grant replied,—

"We could not do otherwise, Madame Mirabel. The whole neighbourhood, so to speak, is watching with you at your poor husband's bedside. Is there no word, as yet, from Dr. Lancaster?"

"None," said Madame Mirabel.

"And is there—er—no change?" asked the rector.

"Only for the worse, I am afraid," she

answered, in stifled tones. "I fear terribly that unless Dr. Lancaster returns within the next two days, it will be too late."

The Grants did not linger. In fact it was clear to them that they could do no good, and Madame Mirabel was evidently anxious to rejoin her dying husband. But it was known all over Hindhead before night that the patient had grown worse, and appeared to be sinking rapidly. That evening, prayers were put up for him at the week-day service in church.

Friday came—and went. The blinds were still kept down; no sign was visible of any arrival. The door was opened to enquirers by a tear-stained servant, who only said that the master was worse and they feared there was no hope. Pressed a little further by one lady, she confessed that they only knew what Madame Mirabel had told them; no one was now permitted to enter the sick-chamber but herself.

"I wonder *what* she telegraphed, Mar-

maduke," said Mrs. Palliser, that evening. "So much might depend on that. I do hope and trust she made it quite clear to him that he must come back at once!"

"I think she did," remarked Gerard. "She assured me that she had worded the message so that there could be no mistake. She's not the woman to do a thing by halves."

This was perfectly true.

That night a very strange thing occurred. About two in the morning, when the house was as still as death, old Mrs. Palliser suddenly woke up, and began to talk in a way that made even Nurse Osborne shudder. She wanted to know who the man was that had just come into the room, and was trying to hide behind the folding-screen; she could just see him—a young man with hollow eyes full of terror, and a frightened look about him somehow—what was he doing there? She thought he must be hiding from somebody who wanted to kill him—he

kept peering out every now and then—and he was trying to say something, but couldn't, because there was somebody she couldn't see who was preventing him. Who was the man? And why did he look like that at her? Ah, he's pointing at something—

"Come, come, there's nothing there; it's all your fancy," said the nurse, as she shook up the old lady's pillow. "Turn over on this side, now, and go to sleep again."

"They want to take him to the churchyard," whispered the old lady, with her gleaming eyes fixed on the nurse's face, "and he is asking for help. There's somebody who will help him when he comes back. Don't let them have him, my dear—lock the door, or they'll come in—there's a woman outside, and she's got a hearse ready, you know—and"—

"Go to sleep, I tell you," said the nurse sharply. The old lady continued to mutter incoherently for a few moments, and then

closed her eyes. The nurse, agitated in spite of herself, altered the position of the screen, trimmed the night-light, and lay down again. But it was some time before she fell asleep, and the next morning she mentioned the occurrence to Gerard.

Saturday! And yet no news of Lancaster. Gerard, on whose mind the nurse's story had left a haunting impression of some unknown and unimaginable horror, sought relief in a long walk through the open country. It was a dull, grey day with a warm, moisture-laden wind, and he cannot be said to have much enjoyed the exercise. Anything was better than inaction, but nothing could possibly alleviate the sense of anxiety and perplexity and foreboding which oppressed him. Had he himself been responsible for poor Mirabel's hopeless state, he could scarcely have felt more uneasy than he did.

He got back about five o'clock, and flung himself down in an armchair near the fire-

place. His mother was in the room, with an open book before her, from which however her attention constantly strayed; at the table sat Mr. Palliser, frowning over the *Times*. For nearly two hours did Gerard remain there, answering his parents' remarks in the briefest possible way. Then the dinner-bell rang.

"I'm not coming to dinner to-night," he said, rising abruptly.

"My dear Gerard! why not?" asked his mother.

"I'm going to Mirabel's," he answered. "I can't help it—I must go. I must know the truth about him. I've a sort of presentiment that I can't resist—I believe that his fate will be decided one way or another this night."

"But you must have some dinner"—began Mrs. Palliser.

"I can eat something when I come back," said Gerard. "Don't worry about me, mother; I feel I must go now. I expect

I shall be able to bring you some news before you go to bed."

He put on his hat, and left the house without another word. The wind had shifted a little since the afternoon, and blew somewhat chillier; black, heavy clouds came rolling up from the south-east, veiling the early moon, while the dark fir-trees waved their branches to and fro as the fitful gusts blew through them. Gerard walked swiftly on in the direction of Gorse Cottage, his whole mind concentrated upon the thought of what lay before him. He was determined that, come what might, *he would see Mirabel;* his conscience smote him for having delayed so long; it was no time now for standing upon ceremony. And if the man were dying, he would stay with him till the end.

Turning a corner, he caught sight of a woman's figure hurrying on in front of him. He quickened his pace, and came up with her.

"Susan!" he exclaimed, recognizing the girl. "Where have you been? How is your master to-night?"

She started violently; then, recovering herself, cried,—

"Oh, Mr. Palliser, I'm glad it's you! There's something dreadful happened I believe—the master was took with a sort of convulsion an hour ago, and I've been for Dr. Charlton. I doubt the poor master's dying—and the doctor's gone to Petersfield, and they don't think he'll be back for an hour. The master's dying, Sir, if he isn't dead already"—

"Dead already?" echoed Gerard. "There, don't cry—the doctor will be here soon, no doubt. What makes you think your master's"—

"I haven't seen him, Sir, for days," cried the girl, "and no one's allowed to go inside the room. And cook, Sir, she swore to me last night she see him all alone, standing in the drawing-room where 'e used to sit

before he was took so bad—standing there in the gloaming for all the world like a corpse as 'ad risen from the dead. She give a shriek, Sir, and came flying down into the kitchen to me like a madwoman, sayin' she believed the master was dead and that his ghost was walking. There seems a curse on the house, Sir—we can't sleep o' nights for thinkin' about it, and I'm sure I've prayed night and day to the Almighty for to send Dr. Lancaster back; the missis she says never a word, and the way that poor thing do keep up is just wonderful —but there's something in it all as we none of us understand, and I'm real thankful as you are coming in just now."

"You shouldn't listen to all that nonsense of the cook's," said Gerard, with a sensation as if cold water were running down his back. "I intend if possible to see Dr. Mirabel to-night, and I shall stay with him as long as necessary."

The girl made no reply, and in a few

minutes they reached the house. Madame Mirabel opened the door.

"I overtook Susan on my way here," said Gerard, without noticing her look of surprise. "Charlton has gone to Petersfield, but will come on as soon as he returns. And now I want to see Mirabel."

She looked at him silently for a moment or two. "Very well," she said at last. "You can come and sit in his room if you wish."

"Is he"—Gerard stopped.

"He is dying, I believe," she answered, briefly.

Gerard followed her upstairs, his heart beating audibly against his ribs. She opened the door, and ushered him in. A single lamp was burning on a side table, and its rays fell flickeringly upon the face of the dying man. But was that Mirabel's face—those leaden, sunken cheeks, those glassy, spectral eyes, those drawn, thin, purple lips? Was it Mirabel's form that lay stretched there, rigid, angular, and still? A ghost—

a corpse—a skeleton; not, surely, a living man!

Sick and horrified, Gerard took a seat on the further side of the bed, and gazed at the wreck of his poor friend. For some time he never stirred, and scarcely dared to breathe. Then he put out his hand, and laid it on Mirabel's. The eyes turned slowly upon him, with a dumb, dazed look; then there appeared in them, very gradually, the far-off glimmer of a smile—the faintest, feeblest, ghost of a smile, as near an approach to one as might be made by a man under torture upon the rack. But only for a second. It faded away again at once.

He sat there for an hour, still holding Mirabel's hand. Not a word was uttered. In a distant corner, away from the light, sat Madame Mirabel; pale, motionless, and silent. What thoughts, we may well wonder, filled her brain during those terrible moments? Did she look beyond the four walls of that fatal room—beyond the scene

around her—out into the distant future? Or was she thinking of the past? There may have been something in her past to cause regret, or anguish, or remorse; there might be that in store for her the anticipation of which might cause her heart to throb with joy, hope, ecstasy; ah, who could tell? Then was that hour indeed a most tremendous crisis. The hard old days of penury and servitude, the years of unequal union with one she had never loved, were now all gone; that night would draw the curtain on them all, and relegate them to the realm of memories: and then would come the hoped-for, longed-for, schemed-for Future! And as she sat in her dark corner, and hid her turbulent sensations under the white mask of her impassive face, as she listened to the ticking of the clock upon the mantelpiece and the stertorous breathing of the doomed man upon the bed, it seemed to her as though she actually heard the passing of Time's footsteps, and the approach of that

new life of joy and victory so soon to be in her grasp.

Another half-hour dragged its slow length along. Then a slight change took place in Mirabel. He grew restless. He rolled his head uneasily from side to side, and Gerard distinctly felt a slight pressure from the thin, dry fingers. There was also an increase in the action of the heart, a movement in the feet, and a wrinkling in the skin of the forehead, which told of some disturbance. Madame Mirabel glanced at him, shook her head, and then resumed her seat. The symptoms quieted down after a few moments, and he fell once more into his normal state of almost cataleptic rigidity; but the alteration arrested Gerard's attention, for he had noticed the appearance of a more human expression in Mirabel's eyes—short and fleeting, indeed, but still unmistakeable while it lasted. There was a look of watchfulness, eagerness, almost of hope. What could that portend?

This occurred three times; then, as though exhausted by the excitement—if excitement it was—Mirabel sank into even profounder lethargy than before.

Suddenly a slight noise from downstairs was heard. The bell pealed, and there was a sound of persons moving. Madame Mirabel started, and bent her head as though listening. "Dr. Charlton at last!" she said in an undertone, glancing towards Gerard. Mirabel continued motionless; but he breathed more heavily, and there was a tremor in his hands which seemed to indicate a sort of hidden agitation. Gerard even fancied he saw the slightest possible flush upon his wan cheeks; but this almost immediately subsided, leaving them as darkly pallid as before. The eyes remained fast closed.

Then footsteps were heard ascending the staircase. They came nearer and nearer; they were quick and hurried, like those of one who fears he may be too late. Was

Charlton really back at last? Would he be able to do anything for the patient now that he had come? A little flame of fire, darting up from the neglected embers, illuminated the room with its red glare, bringing into still ghastlier relief the corpse-like features of the sufferer. It seemed to Gerard like a harbinger of the impending crisis. Then the door opened with an impetuous move ment, and in rushed—Dr. Lancaster.

He stood transfixed, as his eyes fell upon the awful figure on the bed. Astonishment, perplexity, and horror deprived him, for a moment, of the power of speech. "My God!" he ejaculated at last.

The two servants, weeping bitterly, followed him into the room, regardless of their mistress's orders. One, who was a Catholic, fell upon her knees and crossed herself. Madame Mirabel advanced, and stood at the foot of the bed.

"My poor fellow!" exclaimed Lancaster, bending over him in a very passion of pity

and remorse. "What can have happened to you? Good God, why did I not know of this in time!"

Slowly and painfully, Mirabel opened his eyes, showing the same glassy, dreadful stare which had become habitual to him. For a moment or two he saw no one; and the profoundest silence reigned. Then he turned his gaze on Lancaster. A puzzled expression now succeeded the hard, unseeing look; then came astonishment, wonder, hope, and finally there leaped into his eyes a bright, swift flash of joy—such joy as had never shone from them before—the joy of a great deliverance, of quickening and returning life.

"Lancaster!" he almost shrieked, throwing out both his hands. "He has come to me at last. Lancaster, my friend, save me! Ah, my God, I have died a thousand times. I thought you would never come, and I should go into the blackness and the darkness for ever. But now you are here, and I shall live—live—live! Ah, it is good to

see you. I am happy now—it is at last well with me—you will save me, Lancaster, and I shall die no more."

A bright, sweet smile of unutterable happiness overspread his face. The moment afterward his strength failed, and he gasped a little for breath; then, with a look of entire content and peace, he sank gently back upon his pillow, and passed into the great Beyond.

CHAPTER VI.

"IT WOULD BE COWARDLY TO RUN AWAY."

WE meet our friends the Pallisers again on a snowy morning in January. The undulating stretch of beautiful table-land is covered a full foot deep with a carpet of unsullied white, over which a gray sky arches duskily; but the air is pure, and soft, and still, and the trees bend under their heavy wreaths of silvery fur, and the blue smoke of the wood-fires rises high into the clear atmosphere with scarcely an appreciable curve.

Within, a cheerful glow falls upon the spotless napery of Mrs. Palliser's pretty breakfast-table, at one end of which her

husband, who has pushed his cup aside, now sits immersed in last night's *Globe*,—for the London morning papers are not procurable on Hindhead as early as, perhaps, they might be,—while Gerard is playing listlessly with his spoon, glancing ever and anon in the direction of the door. There is a brisker, brighter look about Mr. Palliser than when last we met him; the careworn, troubled scowl has apparently disappeared, and his expression, as he reads the 'turn-over,' is unmistakeably benign.

"Yes, it's a brightly written little sheet," he remarked complacently, as he passed it on to Gerard. "Those paragraphs on the second page are always sparkling and chatty. But I wish the *Times* would come."

"The gardener ought to be here soon," remarked Mrs. Palliser. "I told him to call at the station for it on his way, as I knew you'd be anxious to see it. What makes you think the news will be in this morning?"

"A man told me some days ago it would be out in a week," answered Mr. Palliser, looking at his watch, "and I've been on the look-out for it ever since. A quarter-past nine. He ought to be here by now."

"The snow's pretty deep," suggested Gerard.

"Ah, so it is," returned his father. "I dare say it's heavy walking up that hill. Just the sort of day for one of your long peregrinations across country, Gerard."

"Gymnastics are not much in my line," said Gerard, drily.

"Well, it's been a dreadfully anxious time," remarked Mrs. Palliser, reverting to the former subject. "It was bad enough for us, but it must have been far worse for the banks and people in the City. Over-speculation, I suppose, as usual. 'They that make haste to be rich'—the old story, you know. I do hope it's all over now, Marmaduke?"

"I think we've weathered the storm,"

replied Mr. Palliser. "I think so. But it has been an uncommon close shave—uncommon close. If the Metropolitan Joint Stock Bank had gone, half the City would have been ruined. My word! I shall never forget what it was like the last time I went up to town. However, I think it's all right now. We've pulled through this time, anyhow."

"There's the gardener!" exclaimed the good lady. "I hear him stamping the snow off his shoes outside."

Mr. Palliser rose, pulled down his waistcoat, and awaited events. It *was* the gardener, and the next minute he had pounced upon the *Times*, and was poring through his gold eye-glasses over the City article.

"It's floated!" he suddenly cried, in a triumphant tone.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed his wife.

"Floated at last," repeated the worthy gentleman impressively. "Gerard, this con-

cerns you. Do you hear? That company is floated at last!"

"What company?" asked Gerard, absently looking up from his paper.

"What company, indeed!" echoed his mother. "My dear boy, you don't deserve to have anything done for you at all; upon my word you don't. Why, that company your father took shares in last May; have you forgotten already? The Anti-Intoxicating Liquor Association, of course, in which you were to be one of the agents. It's been hanging fire all this time, owing partly to difficulties about registration or something — *I* don't understand it — and partly to all this dreadful panic-affair that has happened in the City since. And now at last it's floated, and you don't seem to take any more interest in it than—than— Oh, you drive me out of all patience, Gerard," concluded the excellent lady, unable to find a simile of sufficient strength.

"I remember it well enough," said Gerard.

"I'm glad it's floated. You'll be able to get out of those shares now."

"What—sell the shares? You must be mad, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, peremptorily. "It would be just throwing away a fortune. You see now, Gerard, how mistaken you were about the matter. I was always sure that your father must have been right."

Gerard smiled. "I suppose the Directorate is a strong one," he said interrogatively. "Of course, if it's in the hands of respectable capitalists who know what they're about, that's another thing altogether."

"H'm—let's look," said Mr. Palliser. "Ah! here it is. 'Directors—The Earl of Rottentowers, K.P., Sir Hocus Juggle, Bart., Lord Swindledupe, Lord Featherbrain, the Hon. Augustus Flatt, Colonel Innocent (Royal Bengal Superbs), Dodson Fogg, Esq., Janus Blandyshe, Esq., and Letts Cheetham, Esq.,—with power to add to their number.' Upon my word, it reads

uncommonly well. The Earl of Rottentowers belongs to the very oldest and bluest blood in the United Kingdom. His name is a guarantee in itself. You've heard of Blandyshe, of course. The great philanthropist, you know. Flatt's a son of Viscount —er—Viscount—er—bless my life, I shall forget my own name next; Fogg and Cheetham are both lawyers, I believe. What I like about the Directorate is its representative character; its absence of cliquism. Doesn't it strike you in the same light, Gerard?"

"I think the list would look better if it included the names of a few solid merchants —men who are known to have money at their backs, and who occupy a position of some sort in the City," remarked Gerard mildly.

"Why, it's a splendid Directorate!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser. "I can't think what you want, my dear, I'm sure. However, we shall see. It would be a thousand pities to

do anything rash, and it would be more than rash — simple lunacy, indeed — to go and sell the shares just when the enterprise is being started. But it's just like you, Gerard, to throw cold water upon everything. You always will look upon the dark side of things, and it's a fault you ought to try and cure yourself of, my dear. You'll find it a clog upon you through life."

The sound of a lady descending the stairs was now heard from the outside. Gerard looked up expectantly.

"There's Madame Mirabel at last," said Mrs. Palliser. "How late she is this morning, to be sure!"

Yes, it was true—Madame Mirabel was actually a guest in the cheerful household of Mr. and Mrs. Palliser, and had, indeed, been so for some weeks. As soon as her husband's funeral was over, she had, with the fullest approval of all who sympathised with her in her bereavement, gone away for

a much-needed rest and change. It would clearly have been impossible for her to remain alone at Gorse Cottage with the remembrance of her husband's distressing death fresh within her, and she no doubt acted wisely in leaving the country altogether for a time. But though she travelled alone, she did not show herself in any way anxious to avoid such opportunities of friendly intercourse as chance threw in her way. She went first to Paris, where she rested for a few days; then she proceeded to the Riviera, where the hotels were very full. Madame Mirabel put up at one of the most frequented, and immediately attracted attention. Her deep mourning, combined with her unquestionable beauty and grave, sweet manners, made the young English widow an object of much interest and regard. It was known that her loss was recent, yet she never obtruded her sorrows upon other people, as some women might have done, nor did she encase herself in a panoply of reserve;

on the contrary, she was quiet and unassuming, cheerful in a subdued way, always ready to take an intelligent part in conversation, and amiable to everybody she met. And she did more than not avoid society; she actually courted it. It was soon observed that Madame Mirabel was never alone. If she went out for a walk, she was sure to have some companion; a woman, be it observed, as often as a man, so that no shadow of reproach was ever cast upon her; while indoors she was always found in the most cheerful group, surrounded by the best talkers, and interested in every subject that might be discussed. One lady, who had seen perhaps more of her than most other guests, referred smilingly to this one day, and congratulated Madame Mirabel upon being the most *répandue* of them all. "Yes," she replied. "Sorrow affects people differently. Some women in my position would find society intolerable. My feelings are just the opposite. Ever since my

husband died I have had a morbid horror of loneliness."

Madame Mirabel stayed abroad about two months, at the expiration of which time she found it necessary, for business purposes, to return to England. In her letters to Mrs. Palliser, with whom she corresponded, she of course mentioned the fact, remarking upon the painful associations which would be revived on her resuming occupancy of Gorse Cottage. Gerard immediately proposed to his mother that Madame Mirabel should be invited to stay with them for a few weeks, until her plans for the future were matured; and Mrs. Palliser, though somewhat taken aback at the suggestion, eventually agreed to it. Mr. Palliser, of course, had no objection, and the invitation, on being sent, was gratefully accepted. What wonder that Madame Mirabel felt reluctant to go and live all by herself in a house haunted by such dreadful memories? And thus it happened that she was now installed,

a welcome guest, under the Pallisers' hospitable roof, with Gerard as her *cavaliere servente.*

"I'm disgracefully late," she said, after greetings had been exchanged. "The fact is I didn't have a very good night, and so I over-slept myself."

"You look as though you hadn't slept well," remarked Mrs. Palliser sympathetically, as she noticed Madame Mirabel's pale cheeks and the dark rings round her eyes. "A cup of good strong coffee will be the best thing for you; nothing like coffee when you've had a bad night. It's a pity the snow's so deep, otherwise you might have a walk. The air was delicious when I opened my bedroom window an hour ago."

"Yes," assented Madame Mirabel, as she drank some coffee, and made a not very successful effort to dispose of the toast and bacon with which Gerard had provided her. "I think I should like to get out a little if possible—I'm not afraid of the snow, and

I dare say there are some places where it isn't quite so deep as it seems to be just here."

"I'll come with you, if you don't mind," said Gerard.

"I shall be very glad indeed," she replied, quietly. "I want to go over to the Cottage."

She had only been there once since her return, and Mrs. Palliser had noticed that she seemed ever so little upset when she came back,—than which nothing could be more natural. The place was in temporary charge of a care-taker, the two servants having been dismissed to their respective homes in Petersfield and Liphook.

"Dear Madame Mirabel," said Mrs. Palliser, after a pause, "do you really intend to go and live in Gorse Cottage permanently again? Don't you think it would be nice, now, if you gave it up, and looked out for some pretty place in the neighbourhood of Shottermill, for instance, or Liphook? I remember a few weeks ago there was a

charming little house to be let near Bramshott, and it may be empty still. It has always seemed to me that Gorse Cottage is so exposed."

"That is true," replied Madame Mirabel, "but I doubt whether I could let it easily, and you know we took it for three years. Besides, don't you think it would be rather cowardly to run away?"

"Cowardly! Why?" asked Mr. Palliser somewhat abruptly.

"Of course I understand what you mean," continued Madame Mirabel, "and no doubt there are some persons to whom it would be impossible to live in the house again. But I think that such feelings ought to be over-ridden. They are simply a sign of weakness, and should not be given into. Besides, the place suits me."

In what way it suited her, Madame Mirabel did not explain; but it certainly seemed to have a very strange fascination for her, judging by the systematic way in

which she explored it an hour afterwards in company with Gerard, and the length of time she lingered in every room. The house looked, as houses do under such circumstances, gloomy, and empty, and desolate. And there was something in the atmosphere of it, apart from the physical cold, that made her companion shiver. She herself appeared to feel it too, but she never gave way to it for a moment. In fact, the more painful were the associations of any particular room, the longer and more deliberate was her stay in it. Gerard wondered, but said nothing. Nor did Madame Mirabel say much. Her face was calm, but there was a set expression in it, a look of purpose and determination, and she seemed to be deep in thought. It occurred to Gerard that she was there to test her own strength of mind, to see what effect the sight of the rooms would have upon her, and whether it would be possible for her to inhabit them again, alone; perhaps to accustom herself

to them beforehand; again, what more natural, now that she had made up her mind to return? Once or twice there was a look of enquiry, or expectancy, in her eyes, as if she were searching for something, or thought she might see something, in one or other of the rooms; but she gave no sign, and Gerard was conscious of a great relief when she said she was ready to go.

The snow was hard and crisp, with a deepish drift every now and then, and the sun had just begun to send a few faint glimmers through the gray canopy overhead. They walked on for some time in silence. At last Madame Mirabel observed,—

"I have always thought it a great mistake to avoid all mention of the dead, as scrupulously as so many people do. One is constantly thinking of them; why should they never be talked about? I confess I have no sympathy with such feelings."

"Perhaps it is a mistake," said Gerard.

"For instance, why does no one ever

speak of Gaston in my presence?" she continued. "Do they think it would hurt me? I think it is far worse to feel that there's a subject which is really uppermost in all our minds, and which yet must never be referred to. I suppose you, now, think of him sometimes?"

"Indeed I do," said Gerard, "and of his dreadful death. I shall never forget that."

"Yes, it was all very terrible," said Madame Mirabel. "And yet, you know, when we remember what his belief was—how sure he was of a brighter existence in the future"—

"Ah!" interrupted Gerard, with a slight show of animation. "Do you remember what he said once, when we were discussing his Theory—that I doubted it, but you denied it? I think it might have made him happier for your sake if you could have admitted the possibility of its truth. I wonder how many of his projects have been realised since!"

"Then you no longer 'doubt'?" said Madame Mirabel.

"Yes, I do," replied Gerard. "I neither believe it nor disbelieve it. There is only one thing that would convince me of its truth."

"And that is—?"

"The sight, in broad daylight, of a person I knew to have died," he said.

"Hallucinations are common enough," answered Madame Mirabel, with a touch of scorn. "I would not believe in the objectivity of any apparition, even if I saw one."

"Then you really believe that Mirabel no longer exists—that he is absolutely and entirely annihilated?" asked Gerard.

"I believe," she said slowly, "that at this moment he is as absolutely non-existent as though he had never been born."

Gerard had never quite realised what annihilation meant until Madame Mirabel put it like that. It caused a reaction at once.

"I can't believe that," he said. "There are some personalities so intensely real to us that their extinction seems an impossibility —all one's natural intuitions rebel at the idea. I know," he added with a slight laugh, "that I am contradicting what I said just now. Perhaps it will be clearer to me some day."

Madame Mirabel made no reply, and they walked on for a short time in silence. At last Gerard observed, somewhat hesitatingly,—

"Do you know, I can't help thinking my mother was right about that house. I wish you hadn't decided to go and live in it again. I'm sure you'll not be comfortable."

"What makes you think so?" she asked.

"I felt anything but comfortable in it myself, just now," said Gerard, simply.

Madame Mirabel glanced quickly at him for a moment.

"You should study physiology," she replied with the slightest possible smile. "The

nervous system is the most treacherous agency we have to deal with in life. It is constantly leading us astray, and always will unless we get to understand it thoroughly, so as to be ever on our guard. You say you felt uncomfortable just now in Gorse Cottage. Well, so did I. There's no reason why I shouldn't be as frank as you are. But what of that? The house was cold, and silent, and deserted; and the sight of the rooms evoked associations which cannot but be painful as long as they linger with us. Now my common-sense tells me that to give the house up altogether, upon such grounds as you suggest, would be a supremely stupid thing to do—apart from the fact that I have it on my hands for about two years more, and cannot afford to pay a double rent. I should feel contemptible in my own eyes were I to give way to sensations so purely subjective and illusory. I shall be lonely, I dare say; but then I have to live alone—

it is not a question of choice—and after all I shall not be wholly without companionship. I have my books, you know, I have a few good friends, and—I have you, Gerard. I suppose we shall meet occasionally."

Gerard flushed with pleasure. She did not include him among the few good friends —she gave him a place by himself. From that moment he walked on air.

"I think you will have some difficulty with my mother when you begin to talk of leaving us," he said. "She has taken to you wonderfully of late."

"Your mother has been kindness itself," answered Madame Mirabel. "But of course the day must come, and there will soon be no excuse for taking further advantage of her hospitality. How fresh the air is! A walk on a day like this seems to renew one's youth. I have always intended to try and get as far as Selborne some fine day, but I'm almost afraid it's beyond my

reach. There's no exercise I enjoy so much as walking."

"Do you never ride?" asked Gerard.

"I've never been able to afford it," she said frankly. "I've no doubt it is very exhilarating; but then one must always have a feeling of dependence, and that I do not like. I prefer being free on my own feet. I have a passion for freedom—freedom from all conventional restraints of whatsoever nature, from intellectual tyranny, from predispositions, above all from subjective illusions"—

"Especially those which arise from that treacherous nervous system," put in Gerard, laughing.

"They all arise from that," said Madame Mirabel. "Ah, how few of us are really emancipated! And emancipated we never shall be as long as we remain ignorant. Knowledge is freedom, for without knowledge we are the slaves of error in its most fatal forms. All our social systems, all our

accepted codes, are based upon one grand mistake—the mistake of imagining that they are the outgrowth of some absolute, definite principle. On the contrary, they are composed of inherited instincts, bound together by conventionalities. Take ethics, for example. Is there any true basis under our popular notions of morality? The extinction by one man of another man's life is called murder, and punished accordingly. It is as much 'murder' to kill a tyrant who is a curse to millions, or to extinguish the life of a monstrosity as soon as it is born, or painlessly to put a hopeless sufferer out of his misery, as to poison a harmless fellow-creature in cold blood from sheer spite or hatred. Isn't that absurd? There are nations among whom it is the highest exhibition of filial piety to put an end to one's parents when they have grown old. Why should the same act be moral there and immoral here? Oh, the inconsistency of our European moralists is simply charming.

They will talk of such-and-such historical personages who lived two thousand years ago in terms of admiration, almost of reverence, in spite of the fact that the private lives of these personages were such as would consign the offender to-day to eternal ostracism—to the universal detestation of his fellows, so that his very name would not be mentioned in polite society. And why? Well, the historical personages were great men; they were poets, and statesmen, and philosophers; their works are read in all our schools and universities, and they are revered accordingly. It is nonsense to talk of the principles of our morality after that. We have no principles. In fact there are none to have. Everything begins and ends with expediency, and I believe that people are beginning to see the truth at last."

"I think *your* emancipation must be pretty complete," observed Gerard, mildly wondering.

"I certainly have very few prejudices," she replied.

Gerard fell into a fit of musing. Very few prejudices! Of how many women of his acquaintance could that be said? His dear good mother, for example: why, she was full of prejudices—excellent prejudices in their way, no doubt, and always on the side of good, however mistakenly—but prejudices notwithstanding; and Gerard was impatient of prejudice in every shape, and rather plumed himself upon his open mind. Rosie, too. What an ignorant, empty-headed, contemptible little piece of pink-and-white she was! And that was actually the creature—as prejudiced as she was ignorant—whom the dear foolish old mother had evidently selected as his life-companion. Fancy, he thought, being tied for fifty or sixty years to a hollow thing like Rosie! No, the world contained but one woman who could command and share his sympathies, who could see with him eye

to eye, who could be to him the confidante and support he needed. His gaze rested on her as she walked free and erect beside him, the pure, fresh air calling up a faint shell-pink in her pale face, her lips slightly apart, her blue, clear eyes shining with intelligence and thought. Would she ever belong to him ?

Their arrival at home interrupted this dangerous day-dream for the nonce, and the luncheon-bell soon gave him something else to think of. Madame Mirabel was as calm and self-collected as usual, and ate with an excellent appetite.

CHAPTER VII.

A MOST UNCANNY ROOM.

THE sympathy of the neighbourhood with Madame Mirabel during the last few days of her husband's life had expanded into something almost like a feeling of cordiality towards her since her return from the continent. Of course, the recency of her loss forbade anything in the nature of invitations; nor did Mrs. Palliser ask anybody to the house. But calls were not infrequent, and Madame Mirabel, to her somewhat cynical amusement, found herself quite a popular character. She no longer made her mental superiority felt in the irritating way that had previously so much annoyed the good ladies

who were inclined to patronise her. She listened with smiling indulgence to their tea-cup chatter about parish work, district-visiting, art-embroidery, and nice books; she joined in their conversations, illuminating the trivialities in which they delighted with clever and original suggestions; she even went so far as to express a wish to know more about such things, and to deplore, in a tone of gentle regret, that her life had up till then been so sadly useless. Gerard was perhaps the only person who felt that in spite of everything she was not really changed; and he was fain to admire the good feeling and unerring tact with which she adapted herself to her surroundings.

And then she patronised Rosie. Nothing more was required to confirm good Mrs. Palliser's new-found affection for her guest. As soon as she saw that, all reserve, all concealment, was for ever at an end. Was not Rosie a dear, sweet child? And would she not make a perfect, an ideal, wife for

dear Gerard? Madame Mirabel's lips took a significantly downward curve when she heard that; but she replied that no doubt such an arrangement would be most desirable, supposing that Gerard could be brought to view dear Rosie in the proper light. And then Mrs. Palliser would sigh, and look rather wistful—there was such a vein of perversity in dear Gerard somehow, and it was so curious that he did not take more after his parents, in which case of course there would have been no difficulty; so Madame Mirabel would suggest that they were both full young to settle yet, and that it would be well if Gerard saw something of the world first. This remark would bring up Sweden, and the revived hopes centred upon the great new company, to the pleasurable excitement of Mrs. Palliser; and in this way Madame Mirabel soon found herself on very confidential terms with her good hostess.

But the time soon came when she had to go to her own house. A week after the

incident described in our last chapter, she engaged a couple of new servants, had fresh curtains put up in some of the rooms, altered the arrangement of the furniture in others, opened all the windows, and ordered fires to be lighted both upstairs and down. It was impossible, she told the Pallisers, that she could go on encroaching upon their hospitality for ever, and the sooner she began her new life the better. Mr. Palliser, of course, begged her not to be in too great a hurry, and his wife demurred still more urgently, vowing that she should scarcely know what to do with herself when bereft of so sympathetic and delightful a companion; but no real resistance was made to the inevitable flitting. After all, she was not going very far away; nor was there much reason, apart of course from her widowhood, to commiserate her unduly. She had been left very comfortably off. Three hundred a year in French Rentes, and £5000 from the company in which her husband had insured his

life seven years before, formed a competency with which no young woman in her position need be dissatisfied; while as for society, occupation, friends, to say nothing of that liberty which of all women only a widow can enjoy, she now had the ball, so to speak, at her feet. Indeed many people wondered why, in such circumstances, she elected to remain at Hindhead at all. Up till her husband's death, she had had no friends, excepting Gerard Palliser and Dr. Lancaster. Even now she had received kindness merely, from her neighbours; there was no real sympathy between her and them, no intellectual touch, no enjoyment in each others' society for its own sake. And yet she insisted on staying. True, she had Gorse Cottage upon her hands, and there might have been some difficulty in letting it; but she never even attempted to do so. It certainly looked as though she had some special reason for adhering to both the neighbourhood and the house.

At last it was settled that she should remove on the following Thursday afternoon, and Mr. and Mrs. Palliser and Gerard accompanied her. The snow was still lying about in considerable quantities, but it was hard and dry underfoot, and the walk proved a very pleasant one. Mr. Palliser had never been inside the house before; his wife, as will be remembered, only once. Madame Mirabel thereupon insisted upon their coming in for a cup of tea, and, while this was being prepared, she took them through all the rooms. A sort of awed silence fell upon the group as they went upstairs. The recollection of that terrible evening three months ago came back on Gerard's mind with painful intensity, and the sight of the room in which poor Mirabel had died with the words of hope and life upon his lips affected Mrs. Palliser very distressingly. She kept up a sort of little cooing murmur expressive of the susceptibility within, shaking her head dolorously from side to side, with a woe-begone

look which contrasted strangely with the set calmness of Madame Mirabel herself; while Mr. Palliser h'mmed two or three times frowningly, assuming a judicial air, as though he thought there might be something in the very atmosphere of the place to account for the tragedy that had been enacted in it.

"And yet it's a nice, airy, comfortable room," he said at last, "and you've a fine view from the windows. There's Ludshott Common. It must be delightful here in the summer. I don't know that you're not right after all to stick to the place. You might find it difficult to get another that would suit you equally well."

"That's exactly what I feel," said Madame Mirabel.

A gleam of pale wintry sunshine was lying across the floor, reaching just far enough to gild the lace-edged pillows of the bed. It was a very ordinary room, containing little beyond a pier-glass, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a washing-stand, a toilet-table, a

sofa, and a few chairs; and yet there was something about it that gave one an uneasy feeling, a sense of discomfort, vague and indescribable, but none the less unpleasant. At that moment the sun disappeared behind a bank of cloud, leaving the chamber cold and dull again.

"Marmaduke," said his wife suddenly, "let us go downstairs."

"You don't feel cold, do you?" asked Madame Mirabel, as she prepared to lead the way.

"Not cold exactly, my dear," replied Mrs. Palliser shivering, "but I like the drawing-room better."

They were soon seated comfortably round the fire, and Mrs. Palliser had never felt more thankful in her life for a cup of good tea than she did on that occasion. She looked a little pale, and her hand trembled somewhat nervously for a few moments; she felt her heart beating faster than usual, and wondered whether she had not taken a slight

chill. Gradually, however, she began to feel better, and was soon chatting gaily enough over her tea and toast; but she knew instinctively that it would have been an absolute impossibility for her to go upstairs again under any circumstances whatever. They stayed half-an-hour longer, and then bade their hostess a cordial and affectionate *au revoir*.

"It's not a bad little box," remarked Mr. Palliser, as they walked homewards in the fast-gathering darkness.

"No," replied his wife, as she took his arm. "But, my dear, I could no more live in it than I could fly."

"Why not?" demanded Mr. Palliser.

"I can't tell you, my dear," said the good lady in her staccato way. "I don't know myself. But I never felt so uncomfortable since I was born as I did in that bedroom just now. I couldn't have stayed there another minute if you had paid me a thousand pounds. A sort of qualm came over me, and

if I had been all alone I think I should have screamed out."

"Never heard of such a thing in my life," exclaimed her husband. "The room was all right enough. You're not subject to nervous attacks. You are all right now, aren't you?"

"Oh, I'm perfectly well now," said Mrs. Palliser, who began to feel a little ashamed of herself. "I dare say it was a momentary chill. But if *I* were Madame Mirabel, I could no more sleep in that room"——

"She's the most sensible woman I've ever known," said Mr. Palliser, as his wife paused expressively. "The last person in the world to have any fancies, depend upon it. I'm glad she has decided not to go away. She'll be a great acquisition to the neighbourhood when once she comes out of her shell."

As soon as her visitors had gone, Madame Mirabel went straight into the dining-room, and stood for a few moments upon the hearth-rug, gazing thoughtfully into the fire.

"And so she felt it too," she said under her breath. "That's what comes of an over-sensitive nervous system. Strange, that an impalpable nothing like association should have such power—should be able to affect the very muscles of the heart, and set the nerves quivering! But then that woman is all nerves. She has no mind, in the popular sense of the word. Well, here I am, alone at last—face to face with my new life. Suppose I begin it at once?"

She rang for lights, and then, opening her desk, set herself to work. Many were the documents she opened, glanced through, and docketed, entering the particulars of each in a memorandum-book of severely business-like appearance; then she made various calculations, which appeared to yield a satisfactory result, judging from the expression of her face; and finally she wrote several letters—to her lawyers, her bankers, and the Criterion Life Assurance Office among others. This took her altogether a couple of hours.

At seven o'clock the servant entered to lay the cloth for dinner, and Madame Mirabel went upstairs to wash her hands.

In about fifteen minutes she came down again, a slight flush being perceptible upon her cheeks. She did not seem to have much appetite, but ate steadily through the various dishes placed before her as though determined to make a good meal in spite of herself. For some time she allowed the servant to wait upon her in silence. At last she said,—

"Sarah, have you and the cook been pretty comfortable since you came here the other day?"

"Yes, quite, ma'am, thank you," replied the girl.

"I hope you always remember to see the doors and windows securely bolted at night, before you go to bed?" pursued Madame Mirabel.

"Oh, yes, always, ma'am," said Sarah. "Cook's very particular about that."

"It is just as well to be careful when there is no man in the house," said Madame Mirabel. "I believe there are a good many tramps about just now, and the country-people are a rather savage lot, I'm afraid. Did you see the heath-fire the other night?"

"Yes, ma'am, indeed we did," replied Sarah, "over yonder near the Seven Thorns. They do say there was some dispute between the men and Mr. Mortlock's bailiff, Hori Hale, you know, ma'am, and Peter Moorey put 'em up to it. But no one knows for certain who it was, only"—

"Exactly; and probably no one ever will know," interrupted Madame Mirabel. "I only mentioned the fact because it shows how careful you must be. By the way, speaking of fires, the fire in my room was nearly out when I went up just now. Just see to it, will you, when you have taken away?"

The girl looked surprised. "Nearly out,

did you say, ma'am?" she asked in a tone of wonder.

"Yes, I did—nearly out," replied Madame Mirabel. "You must have forgotten to see to it. I always want a good fire in my bedroom, and you must remember that in future."

"But I'd just made it up, ma'am, a quarter of an hour before," asserted Sarah. "It was burning fine when I left it before layin' the cloth for dinner, and looked as though it 'ud last for hours."

"Nonsense! impossible!" exclaimed her mistress.

"It's as true as true, ma'am," said the girl, as she changed Madame Mirabel's plate and placed the decanters on the table. "I think there must be somethin' wrong with the flue; I've noticed before that the fires won't keep in properly in that room. I was a-going to speak to you about it, and ask whether you wouldn't send for a man to see what's the matter with it."

Something in the girl's manner startled Madame Mirabel into attention. She glanced sharply at her for a moment; then relapsing into her usual indifferent style, said carelessly—

"Well, perhaps that is the reason the room always feels so cold. More than one person has noticed it. You may as well tell somebody to call in a day or two, if it doesn't get any better. But there never used to be anything the matter with it. Go up, now, and make it up afresh, and then come down and let me see about it myself."

The girl left the room, and Madame Mirabel, pouring herself out a glass of port, sank into an easy chair and began to read Lotze's 'Medical Psychology.' The subject interested her, and she read on and on for some time very attentively; for she had the true student-mind, and that power of concentration which is so rare and so valuable a gift. She was still deep in the book

when a tap came at the door, and Sarah entered.

"The fire was quite out, ma'am," said the girl, "but it's burning splendidly now."

"That will do, then; see that it doesn't go out again," replied Madame Mirabel, without raising her eyes from her book.

"If you please, ma'am, would you mind coming to look at it yourself?" asked Sarah.

Madame Mirabel looked at the girl with a sense of annoyed perplexity. For a moment she seemed disinclined to stir; then she hesitated, and finally rose from her chair.

"Very well, Sarah, I'll come," she said, still retaining her hold upon the book. "I see that this fire's getting rather low, so if there is a really good one upstairs perhaps I may as well sit there altogether."

The hall struck chillily as Madame Mirabel left the warm atmosphere of the dining-room, and she shivered slightly as

she ascended the dark staircase with the servant following. Then she opened the bedroom door, and entered. There was a splendid fire in the grate; Sarah had spared neither coals nor wood, and the logs blazed and crackled merrily, sending out little tongues of flame that filled the room with warm, genial light, so as to render any candles or lamps almost a superfluity. No room could have looked cheerfuller or more inviting, and Madame Mirabel immediately decided upon remaining there for the rest of the evening.

"Come, that looks promising," she said, settling herself comfortably upon the sofa with her back to the fireplace. "You may as well light the lamp, though; and put those billets of wood where I can reach them."

"Shall you want anything more to-night, ma'am?" asked Sarah, when she had done what she was told.

"I think not; but I'll ring if I do,"

replied Madame Mirabel, resuming her book.

The clock upon the mantelpiece chimed a quarter to nine, and Madame Mirabel, left to herself, was soon deep again in the mysteries of 'Medical Psychology.' For about twenty minutes she read on uninterruptedly, a slight smile ever and anon curving her lips at certain passages which betrayed what she considered 'the lack of emancipation' under which the philosopher laboured; her attention, however, never flagged, nor did her eyes ever wander from the page. Then, very gradually, she became sensible of a slight, vague, curious feeling of restlessness. Her mind began to seem not quite so clear as usual. She found herself obliged to read a sentence several times over before she fully understood its drift; and even then the author's meaning did not stand out so readily and distinctly as it should have done. The sensation of comfort and repose with which she had lain

down, too, now gave place to one of uneasiness, which soon increased into disquietude. And yet there was no apparent reason for the change. The house was perfectly still, the room was comfortable,—externally at any rate, there was no disturbing cause. At last she had the greatest possible difficulty in maintaining her recumbent attitude; she felt as though she *must* get up. But she was not the woman to succumb to subjective derangements of this sort without knowing the reason why. She quietly put down her book, opened her watch, and felt her pulse. It was full, regular, and healthy. Then she laid her hand upon her heart,—with precisely the same result. What, then, could be the matter? Her nerves were in excellent order; she had never had indigestion in her life; and she certainly had all her wits about her. It was absurd to suppose that she would allow herself to be overcome by fancies. Her brain was too clear and strong for that.

She took up Lotze again, and prepared to resume her studies. To her bewilderment she found the page was almost dark. At the same time she experienced a sensation of strong cold, and shivered. She turned her head with a swift, decided motion behind her. *The fire had gone out.*

For the first time in her life Madame Mirabel was struck dumb. This, at any rate, was no subjective hallucination. She sprang up and stood for a moment or two quite speechless, gazing vacantly at the black grate. Then she knelt down, and examined its contents. The logs were partially burnt through; they were dry, and in excellent condition apparently, and there was nothing, as far as she could see, to account for their sudden extinction. At the same moment she became conscious of a gradual darkening of the room behind her. She looked round, and saw that the lamp was going out too. A slight moisture broke out upon her forehead at this new discovery,

but she preserved her coolness intact. It was evident to her that what was occurring was due to some natural cause, or causes, but what they were she was totally unable to discern. She felt perplexed and curious —even a little irritated ; but what annoyed her most was the sense that came over her of something akin to a nameless horror—a something external to herself, that seemed to envelop her and press upon her, an invisible influence which seemed determined to terrify and appal her, in spite of her admirably balanced nerves. She felt the influence, but she scorned it, and while she scorned herself for feeling it she resolved that it should not gain the mastery. She rang the bell and waited.

The two or three minutes which elapsed before the appearance of the servant seemed to her like hours. She stood, upright and motionless, with her back to the fireplace, gazing in stolid patience into the gathering darkness before her. At last footsteps were

heard ascending the staircase, and the door opened. As the girl came in, and was confronted by the tall, dark, rigid figure of her mistress, standing like a statue in the deep obscurity where twenty minutes before there had been such abundance of warmth and light, she started violently, and uttered a faint scream.

"Don't be foolish, Sarah," said her mistress, sharply. "I see you were right about the fire. It has gone out again. Bring the lamp here, and let us see if we can't find out what is the matter with it."

The girl advanced slowly into the room, and took hold of the lamp, the flame of which had now sunk very low. She tried to turn it up, but the attempt was unsuccessful.

"You must have forgotten to put any oil in," said Madame Mirabel.

"I filled it just before dinner, ma'am, and it's nearly full," replied Sarah, in a somewhat shaky voice. "It seems to me the room's

bewitched—Oh, won't you sleep somewhere else, ma'am? I don't like it, somehow"——

"Nonsense!" cried Madame Mirabel, angrily. "Give me the lamp. There's something the matter with the wick, no doubt. I suppose it wants trimming, or cleaning, or seeing to. It is very annoying that both the lamp and the fire should be so obstinate. Remember to have them looked to to-morrow. I can't go without a fire in my room all the winter."

"If you please, ma'am, I think it must be something in the room itself," said Sarah, trembling. "It makes me feel all-overish, like. Do, pray, ma'am, let us make you up a bed in the spare room. I can't 'ardly breathe, here, somehow."

"Sarah," said her mistress, sternly, "if you wish to stay with me, you must conquer these absurd fancies. The idea of being frightened because a few logs won't burn, and the lamp begins to flicker! I am quite ashamed of you. Come, just give me the

matches. There's a candle somewhere, isn't there? It's on my dressing-table, I think. Good heavens—what's the matter with the woman?"

A sudden shriek from Sarah interrupted Madame Mirabel. She looked the picture of terror. Her face was as white as a ghost's, her eyes were dilated, and her breath came short and quick. At that moment the lamp went out, leaving the two women in total darkness, and the door, which had been left open, banged to violently.

For a second or two neither stirred. Then a cold, hard grip settled itself on the girl's wrist, increasing her fright to frenzy. It was Madame Mirabel's grip. With a strong, swift movement she dragged the half-fainting creature to the door, and opened it. The passage was dark, but there was a glimmer of light in the entrance-hall downstairs, and thither they took their way. The gas was still burning in the dining-room, for

the cloth had not been removed. Madame Mirabel immediately rang the bell. Sarah, pale and trembling, sank into the nearest chair, too much agitated to speak.

A short, stout, phlegmatic-looking woman, with a broad, stolid face and red hair, soon came tramping heavily into the apartment in answer to the summons. Madame Mirabel eyed her favourably. Here, at any rate, was a person not likely to be scared at nothing. The housemaid, poor hysterical creature, would have to be employed downstairs in future; it was the cook who must see after the bedroom.

"Cook," said Madame Mirabel, "there is something wrong with the fireplace in my room, and I want you to have it seen to to-morrow. This foolish girl has been terrified out of her life at finding me in the dark. Will you remember?"

"All right, 'm," said the cook, briefly.

"And I want the care of my room to be in your charge," continued Madame Mirabel.

"I have a particular reason for this. Just take a light and go upstairs now, will you, and see that everything is in order. I shall go to bed early to-night, I think."

"For God's sake, ma'am, don't!" cried Sarah, with a look of anguish. "Sleep in the spare room—we can easy make up the bed there, and air the sheets. O ma'am, I do beg and pray of you not to go into that room again to-night!"

"Silence!" said her mistress, sternly. "I will not ask you to go there again yourself, since you are so foolish; but everybody, I trust, is not afraid of the dark. There, go downstairs into the kitchen, and try to pull yourself together if you can. Cook, see to my room at once. I'm afraid it's no use your trying to light the fire—it won't burn, somehow. But light a lamp, and make everything ready for me to go to bed."

"I'll see to it, 'm," replied the cook, departing.

"And now listen to me," added Madame

Mirabel, as soon as she was alone with Sarah. "You have behaved in a most childish and silly manner this evening, and it is a good thing for you that you have such a sensible, strong-minded woman as the cook to sleep with. But I cannot have such an exhibition again, remember. I suppose your head is full of hobgoblin stories, and such-like rubbish. What was the matter with you when you screamed out just now up-stairs?"

"I can't tell you; I can't tell you, not if I was to die for it," moaned Sarah, hiding her face in her apron.

"You can't tell me," repeated Madame Mirabel, scornfully. "No, I dare say you can't. Well, I'm not curious; only don't let there be any more of it, mind. Go down-stairs now, and warm yourself by the kitchen fire until cook comes down again."

Sarah departed, sobbing and trembling, and Madame Mirabel remained for a few minutes alone in the dining-room. A look

of stern and thoughtful determination came into her face. "Whatever it is," she muttered to herself, "I will not be conquered. Bah! a puff of wind, an armful of green wood—it must have been green—a bad chimney, a lamp that wants cleaning—are enough to create a perfect regiment of ghosts in the imagination of such idiots as that girl. I *will* sleep there—or know the reason why."

"Your bed's quite ready, 'm," said the cook, looking in.

"Thank you," said Madame Mirabel, turning out the gas with a firm hand. "You can shut up now; and, cook, don't encourage that silly girl to talk."

Then she took her candle, went straight upstairs, and locked herself securely into the dreadful room.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THEY THINK I WANT A SHEEP-DOG!"

MADAME MIRABEL, as our readers are already aware, had always been a great walker, as well as a diligent student; and from the time she resumed her occupancy of Gorse Cottage she became indefatigable in both respects. Were the weather fine or wet, warm or cold, she never missed her rambles, spending indeed seldom less than four, and sometimes even five, hours every day upon the broad heaths and country roads. Very frequently she was accompanied by Gerard, whose devotion became more marked as time went on; sometimes she would even walk with Rosie

Chattering, whose prejudices had long since begun to give way before the fascinations of the older woman; occasionally Mr. Palliser himself would be her escort. In fact, she never declined a companion if she could get one, and her social tendencies—so different from the cold reserve of former days—together with the real charm and brilliancy of her conversation, which she skilfully adapted to each person she might happen to be with, resulted in her making rapid advance in the good graces of the community. Her little drawing-room soon became quite a favourite resort, and a very cheerful circle would gather in it once or twice a week for a cup of Madame Mirabel's delicious tea, enlivened by the exquisite tact with which the young widow directed and sustained the dialogue. People got into the habit of dropping in, without any invitation, in an informal sort of way, and as Madame Mirabel invariably showed marked deference to the elder ladies who thus honoured her,

and seemed to extend to them even a special welcome, she made sure of everybody's good word. This, again, ensured her a welcome at other houses, and it was not long before her presence was deemed almost indispensable for the success of any coffee-skirmish, tea-tussle, or muffin-struggle that might be afoot. As she had acknowledged to her friend in the Riviera, she seemed to have imbibed a morbid horror of solitude.

There was no doubt that she had toned down wonderfully since her husband's death. Even her colour had left her; indeed it was generally remarked that in spite of her wonderful activity she was looking somewhat out of sorts. Her delicate face, pale cheeks, and feverishly bright eyes, all told a tale of unsatisfactory health; and the interest which her fragile appearance gained for her was increased by her frank avowal that she did not sleep well at night. That she was not altogether well was evident; but there was not one of the good ladies that

liked her and sympathised with her who had any notion of the secret causes which lay at the root of the altered looks—the nightly struggle with influences she contemned and mocked at—the desperate persistence with which she clung to the supreme aim and object of her life—the fierce, hidden passion that was burning and raging within her. She bore up bravely before the world, threw herself into all the society she could command, and was, in the eyes of her neighbours, a fascinating young widow in delicate health, whose charm of manner and conversation made her a general favourite, who *would* over-exert herself in spite of all her friends could say, who really ought not to take such long walks in all weathers, but whose conduct otherwise was irreproachable; yet when she was alone at night, and safe from the observation of others, there were moments when she almost quailed.

"I confess I did not bargain for this," she would say to herself. "What is it—what

can it be? These women, with their invertebrate chatter, I could put up with,—that is a small price to pay; but that other thing —that constant, nightly horror—will it conquer me? It never shall. And yet, what is it? I am not nervous; why should I be the subject of illusions? For they *are* illusions — Gaston is as non-existent as the flame of a candle when it has been blown out. I suppose I am nervous after all—unstrung; bah! it is too disgusting. No —I will fight it down; it can't last for ever —I shall not always be alone." And then a soft light would come into her eyes, and she would grow pensive; while a stiff chapter of Dr. Bain or some fascinating treatise on the Psychology of Epiphenomena would turn her thoughts into more congenial channels, until the clock struck and she braved her bedchamber once more.

Her acquaintances now were fairly numerous, but there was one person of whom she

had scarcely seen anything since her husband's death. This was Dr. Lancaster. For some time past Lancaster had been living as retired a life as was compatible with the practice of his profession, and had confined his visits strictly to his patients; he no longer took any part in social gatherings, and whenever by accident he found himself in the society of others he preserved a look of gravity and pre-occupation which had never characterised him previously. He had, however, quite dispelled the doubts which had once been felt as to the propriety of his conduct in the case of Mirabel. No doubt it was unfortunate—most unfortunate—that he had not made due provision for the address of letters to him at Lucerne from the outset; at the same time, circumstances had subsequently arisen which no one could possibly have foreseen, and he had returned without losing a moment as soon as ever he heard of his patient's critical state. And if the widow herself was satis-

fied, surely no one else had any reason to condemn him.

One afternoon in March, when the sky was gray and the wind bleak outside, a party of some half-dozen ladies were gathered round the fire in Mrs. Fullerton's drawing-room, enjoying their tea and talk. Madame Mirabel was there, lying back luxuriously in a large, low, easy-chair in the most comfortable corner of the room, from whence she contributed her full quota to the conversation. No one, certainly, would have guessed from her appearance that she was not the calm, equable, placid woman she appeared to be; few, in listening to her occasional lively sallies, which sent successive titters of amusement round that matronly and highly proper circle, could have believed that she was not a happy one. The delicate pallor of her complexion, and the feverish sparkle of her blue eyes, imparted that peculiar characteristic to her beauty which can only be expressed by the word 'interesting,' and en-

hanced the fascination which even women now experienced in her presence.

"But isn't it very dull for you in that house, my dear?" asked Mrs. Fullerton, the question having been suggested by a remark from somebody to the effect that one or two suspicious-looking characters had been seen loitering about the neighbourhood. "It's so isolated, you know. I don't think I should like to live all by myself there at all."

"The fact is I'm not very much at home," replied Madame Mirabel, with a slight laugh. "It seems to me that I live almost as much in other people's houses as in my own. And then I walk a good deal, you must remember. Of course it's a little lonely at night."

"Ah," said Mrs. Fullerton. "Well, I think it's a pity you can't have some nice, cheerful companion to live with you. There's Miss Tabor, now, she'd make an excellent companion for you; and I dare say she'd

be glad to come, for I don't suppose she has much to live upon herself, poor thing. Don't you think, now, that that would be an excellent arrangement for you both?"

"Well," replied Madame Mirabel, meditatively, with a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "Miss Tabor—a middle-aged lady who wears rather strong spectacles, isn't she? I think I have seen her once or twice."

"You certainly might consider it," chimed in Mrs. Chattering, briskly. "I'm sure it would be far better for you than living all alone—better in a number of ways. I had a lady-companion to live with me once, and a very great comfort I found her—a very great comfort indeed. It's true I had to get rid of her eventually, for she used to steal the sugar—oh, she turned out a shocking thief, I'm sorry to say; but of course Miss Tabor wouldn't do that, in fact she never even takes sugar in her tea, as I happen to know, and of course you wouldn't have to

pay her very much; but apart from that she really was the very greatest comfort to me —the one *I* had, I mean—for she never talked, or intruded herself upon me in any way, and was always ready to do little errands for me if I had a headache, or when it rained, you know."

"Your experience almost tempts me to make the trial," observed Madame Mirabel, demurely. "A companion who never talked, and didn't mind going out in the rain, must have been a treasure indeed. Such virtues might even have been allowed to counterbalance her depredations upon the sugar-basin."

"And then, my dear, think of having somebody in the house with you at night, now that there are all these tramps about," said Mrs. Fullerton, impressively. "I've a gardener, you know, who sleeps over my stables. I shouldn't get a wink of sleep if I were alone. It's all very well to be brave and independent, but you ought to have some

one with you, my dear, you ought indeed, and *I* think Miss Tabor's just the person."

"How many tramps do you consider her capable of routing at a time?" enquired Madame Mirabel, laughing.

"H'm! Well, there's always safety in numbers, you know," answered Mrs. Fullerton, slightly disconcerted. "She may not be a very brave person, perhaps, but then she'd give the alarm all the sooner if anything did occur. I hope you are always careful to lock up your plate and things before you go to bed. I always take mine to bed with me; it's far safer. I dare say Miss Tabor wouldn't mind doing that herself, now. Then she's a woman of the most excellent principles; and if *I* say that of anybody you may be perfectly sure that they are all right."

"Principles," repeated Madame Mirabel, thoughtfully. "Of course that is a most important point. Do you happen to know Miss Tabor's views upon the currency?"

"The what?" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton.

"The currency," said Madame Mirabel. "I hold very decided opinions upon the subject myself, and it would be too great a risk to take anybody into my house whose ideas were opposed to mine. For all I know, Miss Tabor may be a bi-metallist; and if she is, we could never live happily under the same roof, could we, now?"

For a moment, the silence which fell upon the party was so complete that Madame Mirabel wondered whether she hadn't carried her audacity just a point too far. However, she was soon reassured.

"I do believe you're laughing at us again, you wicked creature!" cried Mrs. Fullerton, wagging her large forefinger at the offender threateningly. "You'll have to be put in the corner if you're so naughty," continued the good lady, with an elephantine attempt at playfulness. "Well, I suppose you're the best judge of your own affairs, and wilful people must e'en have their way. Come,

pass me your cup, and let me give you some more tea. Mrs. Burman, those muffins are hot and fresh. You prefer crumpets, Mrs. Chattering, I know."

Mrs. Fullerton now busied herself with the tea-pot, and the talk became more general. Madame Mirabel's cup was handed back to her by the lady addressed as Mrs. Burman, who occupied the nearest seat.

"But you're not all alone in the world, are you?" asked Mrs. Burman, in a gentle undertone. "I think I heard some time ago that you had a mother living."

Madame Mirabel coloured slightly. "Yes, that is true," she replied in a low voice. "My mother lives quite a recluse existence in London; she is very old and feeble, and scarcely ever stirs from the house. The atmosphere of London kills me, otherwise I should like to go and live with her; but you see I have this place on my hands, and I do not think I could let it readily. Of course I see her pretty constantly."

"Dear old lady!" said Mrs. Burman. "I am sure you must be a great comfort to her. I'm so fond of old ladies; they're always so sweet and beautiful, I think, with their gentle manners and soft white hair. My own dear mother died three years ago," she added, with a sigh. "One seldom knows the value of one's parents till they are taken from us, I often think; and then it is too late to cherish them, isn't it?"

"It is, rather," replied Madame Mirabel.

"Well, it is a great blessing for you that you have such a dear, sweet mother still with you," continued Mrs. Burman, "and I am sure you must feel thankful for the privilege. I hope she has all her little comforts in her old age, and nice, kind people to wait upon her. And so she lives in London. What — a — neighbourhood, now, may I ask?"

"A very quiet neighbourhood—a sort of park," replied Madame Mirabel, who remembered having heard Mrs. Burman spoken

of as the greatest gossip in the place, in spite of her insinuating ways. "Well, I must be going; it will be dark before I get home, even now. Will you come and drink tea with me on Friday? Mrs. Fullerton is coming, and one or two more, I think."

The invitation was readily accepted, and Madame Mirabel rose to make her adieux. It was nearly dark when she left the house, and the wind blew fresh and strong over the common; but she was well wrapped up, and, enjoying the pure, cold air, did not seem in any hurry to reach home. A low laugh escaped her as she walked leisurely on her way. "That was a delightful joke about Miss Tabor," she said softly to herself. "They evidently think I want a sheep-dog, like Mrs. Crawley. I suppose they would like to get a spy into the house, who would gossip with the servants and tell them everything I say and do." The idea seemed to divert her vastly, for she dwelt upon it for some moments with keen relish. Another

ripple of amusement passed over her lips as she recalled Mrs. Burman's attempts to pump her about her mother. "The dear, gentle, white-haired old lady!" she murmured under her breath. "What a pity she wasn't there to hear such a description of herself!"

A sound of wheels approaching from behind interrupted her flow of thought. She turned her head, and perceived the flashing lamps of a dog-cart. The next moment it had overtaken her, and she immediately recognised the occupant. It was Dr. Lancaster.

"Why, Madame Mirabel! Is that you?" he exclaimed, pulling up.

She answered not a word, but stopped in her walk and waited.

"You can drive home," said Lancaster, throwing the reins to his servant. He jumped down and joined her. "You are out late," he said, as they shook hands. "I'll walk home with you if you don't mind."

"Thank you," she said, quietly. "I have scarcely seen you since I returned."

"No—I've been very busy," he replied, as they walked slowly on through the gathering darkness. "I've had much to do and much to think about. How are you getting on?"

"Well, I don't lead a very eventful life, as you may suppose," she replied in a low tone. "Of course I'm lonely. But that was to be expected. I have nothing to complain of, otherwise."

"But I hear of you everywhere," said Lancaster, smiling. "You seem to have plenty of friends, at any rate."

"Friends!" repeated Madame Mirabel, with a slight, scornful laugh.

"They mean kindly," replied Lancaster, "and I have been glad to hear that you respond to their advances. I should be sorry to think you were leading an absolutely solitary existence."

"Oh yes, they are very good to me, I am

sure," she said with a touch of weariness. "It is not their fault that they cannot fill my life. But tell me about yourself. You have been busy, I know—otherwise you might possibly have found time to come and see me, I suppose."

Lancaster paused for a moment. "Yes, I have been busy," he said, seriously. "But that is not altogether the reason why I have not been to call upon you. Apart from my actual duties, my mind has been entirely absorbed by what I call the Lucerne mystery. It weighs upon me more heavily than I can tell you, and seems in a fair way to take possession of me altogether. I shall never rest till I have probed it to the very bottom."

"Ah!" exclaimed Madame Mirabel faintly. "And have you discovered nothing—nothing whatever?"

"Nothing whatever," he replied.

"It's very strange," she observed, as though deep in thought. "I should have

imagined that the telegraph-people would have been able to trace that telegram somehow. There must be something very defective in the system."

"Yes," said Lancaster. "And of course Bretschneider could throw no light upon it. I never saw a man so utterly astounded as he was when I arrived in Bologna and told him I had come all the way from England in response to a telegram from himself. He had sent no such telegram. There had been no possibility of any conference being arranged, for De Véranges was in Paris at the time, and one of the Italian surgeons—not Semenza, but the other—I forget his name—was laid up with fever. Who, then, can have sent it? Who knew anything about the proposed conference, to begin with? And what interest had anybody in committing a fraud to ensure my presence in Lucerne just then? The more I think of it the more insoluble the mystery becomes. And when I think of the terrible

consequences of the crime—for crime it was"——

He paused, his breast heaving with emotion. Madame Mirabel remained silent for a moment or two; then she said, very gently,—

"Dear Dr. Lancaster, you cannot possibly feel more strongly about this unhappy business than I do; I would give half I'm worth to be able to clear it up. But I cannot help remembering that the mischief is irrevocable, and that if you were to discover the entire truth to-morrow it could never bring my husband back to life. Why, then, persist in dwelling upon a matter which is a source of such unhappiness to you—which seems to be embittering your life, and even undermining your health? I do not deny that there may be duties we owe the dead, but surely the interests of the living should be predominant. I know how unselfish you are; for my sake, then, try and put this thing away. It pains *me* to see you sacri-

ficing your happiness to this sense of wrong. I do not ask you to give up all hope or effort, for, as you say, the criminal ought to be punished; but don't let it gain the mastery over you as it is doing now. Put the whole business into the hands of the detectives, and try and forget all about it in the meantime."

"If I only could," he muttered, gloomily.

"You must try," she continued. "And if ever you do hear anything, of course you will come and let me know at once. Two heads are often better than one, and between us I dare say we shall be able to make something out of it. I wonder you never thought of the detectives."

"I communicated with the police soon after I returned, but there has been no result hitherto," said Lancaster.

"Well, then, we must just wait," replied Madame Mirabel. "These things often take a long time to unravel, and no doubt they are investigating the affair in their own

way. Have you never heard again from that old Lucerne doctor who gave you so many clever hints about it?"

"No," said Lancaster, smiling a little at the recollection. "He was certainly an original, that old fellow. Well," he continued in an easier tone, "it has been a great comfort to me to speak to you like this. I have wanted to do so for some time, but I always went on hoping that I might have something to tell you, and so put off coming. I am glad I happened to fall in with you to-night."

"Ah, so am I—very glad indeed," she murmured softly.

They walked along for a short time silently. Both seemed deep in thought. At last Madame Mirabel said, with a slight laugh,—

"I wish you had been at Mrs. Fullerton's this afternoon. The good lady seems to think that it is not proper for me to live alone, and is very anxious

that I should take Miss Tabor as a companion."

"Miss Tabor!" exclaimed Lancaster, amused.

"She is a most respectable person, I believe," resumed Madame Mirabel, "and for a moment I scarcely knew what objection to make to her. I was driven at length to insinuate doubts of her orthodoxy on the question of bi-metallism, which was at once accepted as a sufficient excuse. I scarcely expected to find such very open minds among the people hereabouts."

"I can believe anything of you after that," he said laughing heartily. "And yet, seriously, I am sorry that you *should* be living alone. It can't be good for you; it isn't good for anybody."

"And yet you live alone yourself," she remarked.

"Ah, yes; but I can scarcely help it," he replied.

"No more can I," she retorted gaily.

"We're alike in that respect. But I suppose there is no reason why we shouldn't meet occasionally."

"You don't mind my coming to see you sometimes, then?" asked Lancaster.

"I think I should mind it more if you didn't," replied Madame Mirabel gently.

By this time they were getting near the Cottage, and their steps slackened almost unconsciously.

"I suppose you see a good deal of the Pallisers?" said Lancaster.

"Oh yes," she replied, carelessly. "Gerard is generally at hand when he's wanted; sometimes, even, when"——

"Come, that's too bad," interrupted Lancaster, smiling. "I must say I like young Palliser. There's good stuff in him, in spite of all his pessimistic nonsense. And his parents are a delightful old couple in their way. They seem to me to be all heart."

"Very little head, certainly," said Madame

Mirabel, who did not feel much interest in the Pallisers at that particular moment.

"You are incorrigible," he rejoined. "Positively I dread to think what you may say of *me* sometimes, for I can scarcely have a greater claim upon your indulgence than those good people have."

His tone put her upon her guard. "Don't think I am ungrateful to them," she replied. "I know that they are kindness itself. I have a bad habit of saying things like that, and I wish I hadn't, for I feel that I thereby misrepresent myself. You are not serious, either, in supposing that I ever speak of you in your absence."

"Do you never do so?" he asked.

"Never," she said briefly. "It is only one's most ordinary friends who may be made the subject of general conversation."

Lancaster shot an involuntary glance at her, though it was too dark for him to see the expression of her face. He was silent for a moment or two, and then said, quietly,—

"Thank you. And you intend to stay on here?"

"For the present, certainly," she replied. "I do not see that I should be better off elsewhere, and I have no wish to travel."

"Perhaps you are wise," said Lancaster. "I am glad you are not going away. I should be very sorry to lose sight of you. And no one need be dull who has friends, books, and an object in life. You might accomplish much, with your energy and intellectual gifts."

"An object in life!" repeated Madame Mirabel, thoughtfully. "Yes—that is a great thing, of course. And do you really think me capable of attaining any object on which I had set my heart?"

"I think," said Lancaster, "that you are too clever and too clear-sighted to set your heart on any object that you could not accomplish, under ordinary circumstances."

"That sounds a little enigmatical," she answered with a slow smile. "All I am

sure of is that, had I a cherished object, nothing should stand in the way of my accomplishing it. I have determination and resources, if I have nothing else."

"You have more than that," said Lancaster. "I believe you have a substratum of goodness in you that you are almost unconscious of. You give too free a play to a sort of surface cynicism which belies your real nature. One would think to hear you talk sometimes that in your view goodness is always associated with weakness. Nothing could be a greater mistake. I consider that you yourself are a living proof to the contrary. No one can doubt your strength, and I believe that you are as good as you are strong."

"You would almost tempt me to believe in myself!" exclaimed Madame Mirabel, laughing softly.

"I want you to," replied Lancaster. "Self-scepticism is one of the most mischievous forms of unbelief."

"I am glad that you believe in me, at any rate," she said in a low voice.

They parted at the corner a few moments afterwards, Madame Mirabel peremptorily refusing to allow him to escort her further. He renewed his promise to visit her before long, and, with a quiet word of farewell, walked swiftly in the other direction. Then there came a light into Madame Mirabel's eye, and a flush into her cheek, as she slowly pursued her way, which for a minute or two made her look almost like her former self. Her heart bounded, and a sense of ineffable satisfaction, of certain though as yet unaccomplished victory, stole over her. Rapidly she reconnoitred her position. She was free—absolutely and entirely her own mistress. She had no incumbrances—there was nothing, there was nobody, who could exercise the slightest restraint upon her actions. She was in comfortable circumstances, and therefore able to use her freedom without anxiety or

hindrance. And she was powerful—she felt it. All her shrewdness, all her tact, all her arts of attraction, of allurement, were now to be pressed into the service, were now to co-operate toward bringing about the one great object of her life, that thing to procure which she had struggled and suffered and sinned, and which would soon be within her reach. And to that object everything else should bow. The whole world was no more than a dead leaf to her, in comparison with the love of this one man.

As she turned in at the gate, and began to walk up the heather-skirted path that led to the house, she was suddenly struck with the bright appearance of the windows. There were lights in the dining-room, lights in the drawing-room, and lights in the spare room upstairs. Evidently something unusual was afoot.

"If you please, ma'am, there's a lady in the drawing-room," said Sarah, as she opened the hall-door.

"A lady?" echoed Madame Mirabel, astonished.

"Yes, ma'am; and I think she's come to stay," added the girl, "for she's got two trunks with her, and I've put them up in the spare room. Wasn't you expecting no one, ma'am?"

Madame Mirabel was too much taken aback to reply. Who could this 'lady' be, who had calmly installed herself in the house during her absence, and made herself so very much at home? Here was something that must be seen to at once—something that might mean embarrassment at the very outset. She walked impetuously past the girl, flung open the drawing-room door, and entered.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED GUEST.

"WHAT—*mother!*" she exclaimed, in almost incredulous amazement.

Even so. There was no mistaking that gaunt, lank figure—that worn, green velvet bonnet, those shabby gloves, that well-known look of pretentious, decayed gentility. Mrs. Jickling had been seated in an arm-chair by the fireside, comforting herself with a cup of tea. She now rose, with her very finest and most tragic air.

"Yes, Julia," she moaned, "it's me and no one else. What, I've given you a bit of a surprise, have I? Yet where *should* a woman find a refuge, if not in the bosom of

her own children! The world's just breakin' up around me, Julia, and, like the man in the play, I've come to lay my bones with you at last."

"What in the world is the matter?" asked Madame Mirabel, whose expression at that moment was certainly not suggestive of any impulsive desire to present her bosom as a refuge for her mother's bones. "Do you mean to tell me that you've come down here for good?"

"I might 'ave known it!" ejaculated Mrs. Jickling, flinging herself into her chair again, and applying a very crumpled handkerchief to her eyes. "Why didn't I go to the work'us? Why did I come 'ere to be flouted by the daughter as I nursed and pampered from an infant? I've not been much trouble to you, Julia, all these years—no one can say you've seen too much of me; and now when everything's in ruins, and I've been swindled out of every crust in the cupboard, and not a roof to cover me"——

"Come, mother, don't cry; tell me all about it," said Madame Mirabel, seating herself at the opposite side of the fireplace. "Of course I was surprised to see you; I had no idea you were coming. But never mind that now. What is it that has happened?"

Thus adjured, Mrs. Jickling suffered herself to be appeased. She sniffed pathetically once or twice, unpinned her green satin bonnet-strings, threw them carefully back over her shoulders, and gave her bonnet a dexterous tilt upwards; then, folding her hands, replied—

"Well, Julia, since you're good enough to ask me, I will divulge the truth. I'm a ruined woman! The Incorruptible 'as shut its doors, and swindled me out of every blessed penny I put into it. Every penny, I tell you! Naked came I into this world, Julia, and naked I shall go out of it."

"People generally do," said Madame Mirabel. "But what's the Incorruptible?"

"What's the Incorruptible?" echoed her mother, rather snappishly. "Why, the Annuity Office, to be sure. Didn't you know as I'd got an annuity of a 'undred pounds a year in the Incorruptible and Something Annuity Office in Pancake Lane? No, I dare say your own mother's affairs aren't worth remembering. However, that's the fact, and now I haven't a sixpence in my pocket to cross for luck."

"You mean that the Annuity Office has failed," repeated Madame Mirabel, her lips tightening, "and that your income has come to an end. That is bad news. Have you absolutely nothing left?"

"Well, I've got my pension," grumbled Mrs. Jickling, "but that don't amount to much. One can't live on a handful o' shillin's a week at my age. I must 'ave my little comforts, you know, and it's not as if I'd been a workin' woman all my life, able to put up with anything—people as is accustomed to bein' genteel, and waited on, and

looked up to in their neighbourhood, even though the neighbourhood *is* a low one, can't come down to scrubbin' floors without a pang o' shame, Julia, say what they will. Ah, it's a weariful world, my girl, though *you've* no reason to complain—some folks is born lucky, as I said to you once before, and it's a mercy after all as this thing 'as happened now, instead of when you 'ad your hands full with that poor man of yours as is now in a better world."

Madame Mirabel felt half beside herself with rage and mortification. The position of affairs was now clear enough. The Incorruptible Annuity Office had failed, and Mrs. Jickling, being left virtually destitute, had come to quarter herself in Gorse Cottage for good. What was to be done? How could she get rid of this terribly inconvenient and unwelcome guest? It was impossible that the two should live together. It was impossible that she should introduce her mother to the society of Hindhead. And

yet it was equally impossible to turn her out of doors. For the moment she was entirely nonplussed.

"And what do you propose to do?" she asked, in as steady a voice as she could command.

"Perhaps you could advise me," replied Mrs. Jickling, with a meaning glance at her daughter. "You're a clever one, you know —for myself, I'm just at my wits' end. I s'pose you can give me a shake-down for to-night, anyhow."

A wicked and mischievous inspiration flashed across the daughter's mind. "Certainly," she said. "Of course you must stay here for the present, until we can form some permanent plan for the future. *You shall sleep in my room*, and I will take the spare room for a time."

"As you please," replied Mrs. Jickling, "though why I should turn you out of your own bed I don't see. Why shouldn't I sleep in the spare room, bein' an intruder so to speak?"

"It's not quite ready for visitors," said Madame Mirabel, "and I can rough it better than you can. In my room you'll find everything ready to hand. Just excuse me a minute, will you, while I go upstairs to arrange matters a little. I shall be down again directly, and then you'll be able to make yourself comfortable before dinner."

It would evidently not do to quarrel with her mother, but there might be other ways of making her dissatisfied with the house. Besides, thought Madame Mirabel, as she dragged the two trunks from one room to the other, and hastily collected the few toilet-articles she would require from her own dressing-table, she might herself get a better night's rest in another room than she had had lately. But what a terrible business it was, at the best! Had her mother suddenly arrived on a visit only, it would have been bad enough; for even then it would have been impossible to prevent her meeting some, at any rate, of her neighbours, and a

less convenient and presentable guest could scarcely have been forced upon her; but that she should have come to stay—to live in the house for ever—to be always there, always in the way, always to be considered, and provided for, and reckoned with—the thing was monstrous; it never could and it never should be. She would make almost any pecuniary sacrifice to avert such a contingency.

Mrs. Jickling went upstairs to put herself to rights, as she expressed it, and came down again in a cap which filled even Sarah with amaze. Madame Mirabel bit her lip viciously, but said nothing. "I dare say you won't expect me to dress very much, considerin' my circumstances," remarked Mrs. Jickling, "'specially as you're in such deep mournin' yourself. I must say, Julia, that widow's cap becomes you wonderful. Quite in the latest style, I suppose. There is some women as looks uncommonly genteel in black an' white."

There is no knowing how Mrs. Jickling herself might have looked had she ever affected those sober hues; her taste, however, lay in the direction of somewhat brighter colours, and was now displaying itself in a showy crimson bow, fastened with a large cornelian brooch, and a variegated head-dress that might have put even Joseph's coat to shame. Madame Mirabel wondered whether she would be able to effect some modification in her mother's toilet, and get her to abandon that dreadful bow in favour of some fresh white frilling; for the poor woman's complexion stood in sore need of some such relief, being of that rather turbid hue which is apt to look almost dirty when bordered by any unwashable material. The bow, and the cap, and the worn alpaca dress, garnished at the wrist with cheap bracelets instead of clean white ruffs, formed a *tout ensemble* which made Madame Mirabel shudder, and she silently resolved that some alteration was abso-

lutely necessary before any visitors were admitted.

Of the two women it was certainly Mrs. Jickling who enjoyed her dinner the more. The spotless table-linen, the bright silver, the lights, the service, the simple yet daintily-cooked dishes, formed a marked contrast to the sordid arrangements in Augusta-Victoria Villas, and made a great impression on her mind. This, indeed, was refinement; this was real "gentility"—the gentility after which she hankered—and great was her enjoyment of it. But with the enjoyment came envy. What, after all, had Julia done, that she should possess such luxuries? Had she ever struggled and worked and pinched as her mother had been forced to do? Why should the daughter live in such rich clover while her parent was in dust and stubble? The thought of it almost poisoned her pleasure, while it occurred to her that—perhaps—the old arduous days might now be gone for ever; that the loss of her poor

annuity might prove a blessing in disguise; that Julia, with her spare bedrooms, and well-appointed table, and certain income, could scarcely turn her out to live on a few shillings a week. The present, at any rate, was agreeable; for the future, she would wait and scheme.

"There are three or four people coming in to afternoon tea on Friday," remarked Madame Mirabel after a pause, as she laid down her knife and fork.

"Company, eh?" said Mrs. Jickling. "Ah, it's many a year since I was able to have company in my own house. With your income, of course, you can afford it. Tip-top people you 'ave hereabouts, I expect. And who's coming, if I might enquire?"

"Well—I can only tell you their names, and that will scarcely enlighten you very much," replied Madame Mirabel, drily. "They are elderly ladies, who live in the neighbourhood—Mrs. Fullerton, Mrs. Chattering, Mrs. Burman, Mrs. Palliser, and

perhaps another or two. There's nothing very particular about them."

"Carriage people?" asked Mrs. Jickling, critically.

"I believe Mrs. Burman keeps a donkey-cart for her children," said Madame Mirabel with much gravity, "and I've seen Mrs. Fullerton in a vehicle of some sort once or twice. But I don't think they'll bring their carriages with them on Friday. People walk here, mostly."

"Oh, indeed," said Mrs. Jickling, somewhat mystified.

Afterwards, when the servant had retired, leaving the decanters on the table, Madame Mirabel said,—

"By the way, mother—I think you have heard the name of Lancaster, have you not?"

"Lancaster!" repeated Mrs. Jickling, glancing quickly at her.

"Let me give you a glass of port," said Madame Mirabel. "It is rather a nice wine,

I think. Yes—Lancaster. You remember the name, don't you ?"

Mrs. Jickling nodded her head a great many times, with a look in which cunning and curiosity seemed to strive for the upper hand. "Yes, I remember the name, Julia —though I don't know anything about it, mind ; I'm as much in the dark as a child of six months old, and always have been. Well, what about 'Lancaster' ?"

"Simply this—that you may possibly meet a gentleman of that name while you are here," replied Madame Mirabel coolly, "and so I thought it as well to mention the fact. The identity of the name would be sure to have struck you, and you might have looked startled or taken aback on hearing it. Just bear in mind that you know nothing of him, and that he never even heard of you ; that's all."

"Julia," said Mrs. Jickling, as she delicately moistened her lips from the finger-bowl, "I know nothing of anybody named

Lancaster, and wish to know nothing; neither am I acquainted with your private affairs. I'm not of a curious disposition; and as for bein' afraid I should start, or stare, or do anything foolish of that sort, I can only remind you that I was not born the day before yesterday. Who is this Mr. Lancaster, if I may make so bold?"

"One of the medical men of the place," replied Madame Mirabel carelessly. "Won't you have some almonds and raisins?"

"If there is anything I'm partial to, it is almonds and raisins with a glass o' good port wine," said poor Mrs. Jickling, who had not enjoyed such creature comforts for years. "And you always have late dinner, I suppose. What do you do of an evening, now, when you're all by yourself?"

"Well, I generally read," answered Madame Mirabel. "And as I manage to walk a good deal during the day I'm always ready for bed when the time comes. There

are plenty of books about the house, if you care to look at them."

"You always were a reader," remarked Mrs. Jickling. "Yes, I'll see what books you 'ave some time to-morrow, when I feel settled down a bit. I'll tell you what, though, Julia, you're not lookin' 'alf so well as you ought to. You've lost all your colour, and it seems to me you've been losin' flesh too. You haven't been out o' sorts, 'ave you?"

"Not in the least," said Madame Mirabel. "Of course I've had a trying time. "But I'm strong enough. Won't you have another glass of port?"

The evening passed heavily enough. Mrs. Jickling, overcome by the genial warmth of the room, combined, perhaps, with the natural effects of the good cheer she had been enjoying, began to nod, and was soon peacefully asleep by the fireside. Madame Mirabel essayed to read, but her attention was distracted partly by the elder lady's

somewhat strident snores, and partly by the annoyance and perplexity in which her mother's arrival had placed her. She had thought, for a moment, of writing to put off the friends she expected on Friday. But that would have been to capitulate. If it were decreed that Mrs. Burman should meet the original of the portrait she had sketched —the real prototype of the dear, white-haired, gentle old lady—well, let it be so. Madame Mirabel was too proud a woman to acknowledge even to herself that she might wince; still less was she capable of stooping before the worthy people she despised, or suffering them to suspect for a moment the exasperation she really felt. She had no apprehensions with regard to the possible meeting of her mother and Dr. Lancaster, for neither knew the other by sight; at the same time she was conscious that she would feel humiliated on presenting the doctor to so very undesirable a relative, and was troubled, moreover, at the probable inter-

ference with her liberty of action which the presence of that relative might involve. However, it was useless to brood over the inevitable. She must trust to her native diplomacy, as long as her mother remained, to tide over all the difficulties that might present themselves, and, meanwhile, must set to work to devise some plan for the old woman's permanent establishment elsewhere.

It was a matter of some trouble to get Mrs. Jickling upstairs to bed that night, so overcome was the poor woman with drowsiness. The task was eventually accomplished, however, about ten o'clock, and Madame Mirabel, after seeing her safe into her chamber, sought her own bed in the spare room. She laid her head upon the pillow with a sigh. Only five hours before, how bright had been her prospects; now, how suddenly, how unexpectedly, had they been overcast! A sense of physical weariness came over her, and she closed her eyes

in hopes of the greatly needed sleep. Here, in this room at any rate, she thought, she would be unmolested. Why, she asked herself, had she not moved into the spare room earlier—from the very first? Was it pride that had prevented her—a feeling of self-scorn for the weakness from which she suffered—an iron determination to resist the horror, to vanquish it and drive it off, to vindicate the strength of her nerves and the truth of her materialism at the hazard of her very reason if need were? Yes, it was all this, but there was something more. There was an irresistible *fascination* for her in that other room. She hated it and loathed it, and yet the attraction of it was so powerful that she found herself compelled to occupy it in spite of everything. She would stand by the bed, and call up to the eye of her imagination the prostrate figure of her dying husband. She would rehearse again and again the incidents of his last few weeks of life, until the illusion grew so

strong that she felt as though the months were flowing backward, and that she was living through the experiences of that awful epoch a second time. And then the horror would fall upon her. She would have given worlds to sleep elsewhere, but she could not. The feeling that the room was empty *and waiting for her* drove her back to it night after night. That was the strange thing about this woman—she suffered agonies, but she never flinched. Nor did she fear. In spite of the horrors which seemed to encompass her and penetrate her in that room she turned, as it were, her face to the foe, and defied it. But the struggle was wearing her out. She knew that she wanted a respite, and the arrival of her mother afforded her the desired opportunity. She resolved to put Mrs. Jickling into the fatal chamber, and see what came of it.

She dozed off at last, and slept soundly for three hours. Then she woke up suddenly, with an instinctive feeling that

there was something wrong. She held her breath, and listened. Everything was still; the wind had dropped, and there was not a sound in the house. Then came the old, dreaded, irresistible impulse to go into the other room, coupled with an intense desire to see whether anything had happened to her mother. She lay motionless and obstinate for some fifteen or twenty minutes, battling with the imperious power that was coercing her—daring it to do its worst. At last she turned her head, and glanced across the room. In a moment she saw that the door, which she had carefully shut on retiring, now stood wide open.

It was a feeling of desperation rather than of despair which took possession of her upon this discovery. Defy the unknown thing that was pursuing her as she might, it was proving itself too strong for her. She knitted her brows and set her teeth hard, vowing that she would not give in. And she withstood it bravely. Here the native

strength and clearness of her mind afforded her great assistance. The sensation of horror which even she was unable entirely to resist was partially neutralised by the exasperation she felt at her utter inability to account for facts the actuality of which she could not deny. She was perplexed and baffled, and her anger at finding herself thus confronted by a mystery as impenetrable as it was ridiculous aided her in her struggle against the creeping terrors which assailed her so remorselessly. Determined to investigate the phenomenon, she sprang from her bed and grasped the handle of the door.

Of course she discovered nothing. The lock worked as usual, and the key was still in it, on the inner side. Then came the impulse over her once more with overwhelming force, and this time it was irresistible. She knew and felt that to keep up the struggle would be useless. A will stronger even than her own had taken her at a disadvantage, and was impelling her

to do that which she had determined that she would not do. The next moment she had passed out on to the landing, and was moving with stealthy, silent steps towards the chamber where her mother lay.

* * * * *

The sun was shining brightly, and there was a faint, sweet breath of premature spring in the atmosphere, as Mrs. Jickling descended the staircase about half-past eight o'clock, and entered the breakfast-room. Mrs. Jickling was not one of those persons who look to advantage early in the day. She had not that air of morning freshness about her which suggests the use of a cold tub, and is partly, at any rate, the result of a predilection for soap and water, immaculate linen, and clean caps. On the contrary, it must be confessed that her appearance was distinctly dingy; her brown merino dress was ungraced by cuffs or collar, her black-net cap had evidently seen more service than ought to have been demanded of it, and the

wisp of ribbon which edged her neck would have been better behind the fire. Mrs. Jickling looked rather cross when she first came down, but the expression of her face relaxed at the sight of the well-spread breakfast-table and the cheerful blaze at which she warmed her hands. There was no doubt that Julia knew how to make herself comfortable, and Mrs. Jickling intended to reap the benefit of her late ruin to the fullest possible extent.

In a few minutes Madame Mirabel appeared. She looked pale and ill, with dark rings round her eyes. Mrs. Jickling scanned her curiously.

"Well, Julia," she said, "I can't compliment you on your colour. What 'ave you been doin' to yourself? You look for all the world like a body as 'as been buried and dug up again, I declare if you don't. You haven't got a headache, have you?"

"I am perfectly well, thank you," replied Madame Mirabel, as she seated herself at

the breakfast-table and began to make the tea. "I don't sleep very well just now—that's all. I hope you had a good night?"

"Pretty fair," said Mrs. Jickling, in a doubtful tone. "Lor, what lovely cups you 'ave got, to be sure! They must 'ave cost a pretty penny, I'll be bound. Well, *I* didn't sleep as well as I generally do, either. There's something unhealthy in the air, I suspect. I had bad dreams."

"Perhaps you dined too late," remarked Madame Mirabel.

"I dunno what it was," rejoined the old woman, fretfully. "Something must 'ave set my nerves agog, for all the time I was undressin' I could 'a sworn there was somebody behind me. I got that nervous after a bit I couldn't 'a looked round was it ever so. I don't know what it could 'a been, I'm sure; something wrong with the drains, perhaps. By the bye, your servants don't none of 'em walk in their sleep, do they?"

"Not that I am aware of," said Madame Mirabel calmly. "Why?"

"Because I could take my oath there was somebody in my room last night," replied Mrs. Jickling, nodding her head and frowning portentously at her daughter. "I was asleep at the time, but I heard a rustling sound as woke me up, an' I peered out just in time to see somethin' white disappearin' through the door. I'm no coward, as you very well know, Julia, and of course it *may* 'a been a dream, one can't tell; but I will say this, that it was the most life-like dream as ever 'appened to me, and if it wasn't one o' the servants"——

"Make your mind easy," said Madame Mirabel, with a cold smile. "I looked in myself once, to see that you were comfortable. It must have been I whom you saw. I had no idea that I disturbed you."

"You!" exclaimed Mrs. Jickling, who was not accustomed to such displays of filial tenderness.

"I am always rather restless at night," replied Madame Mirabel, "and often walk about a little. It never occurred to me that you might take me for a ghost."

"You look like one now, anyhow," said Mrs. Jickling rather sharply. "There's something the matter with you, Julia, though you won't own it. What makes you look that white and drawn, and sends you wanderin' about the house in the middle o' the night for all the world like a doomed soul? I tell you what, Julia, it's a good thing for you as I've come to live with you, for if anybody wanted lookin' after *you* do—there's no mistake about that. Are you ailin' any way, or 'ave you got something on your mind?"

"As regards your residence here, that can be discussed later," said Madame Mirabel, white with suppressed rage. "I have told you that I am not ill, and require no looking after. Let me give you some of this omelette."

Mrs. Jickling felt that she had made a

mistake, and continued for the next few minutes to eat in silence. Nothing, in fact, that she could have said would have been better calculated to strengthen Madame Mirabel's determination to find another residence for her at the earliest possible opportunity. The speech had made it impossible to keep her at Gorse Cottage. She was not only in the way; she evidently had all the instincts of a spy, and Madame Mirabel did not intend to have a spy about her if she could help it.

"I dare say you would like to rest this morning," she said at last, when breakfast was drawing to a close. "We can go out this afternoon if you feel inclined. Meanwhile I think it would be advisable for us to go through your wardrobe, and see if some of your gowns don't want seeing to a little. I suppose you have brought them all with you?"

"Oh, yes," replied Mrs. Jickling, briskly. "There ain't so many of 'em but what I

could get 'em all into two trunks, and they'd be all the better of a little overhauling. You was always clever with your needle, Julia, though you never did take kindly to needlework as a girl, and if you can make my things a little more shipshape than they are I won't say but what I'll take it kind of you."

"Very well, then," assented Madame Mirabel. "We'll set to work at once, and see if we can't smarten them up a bit. I dare say there are some things you won't require any more. This afternoon we can walk to Haslemere, and get any trifles that may be necessary for you. To-night," she added, "you can sleep in the spare room, and I will go back to my own."

She knew that her experiment had been a failure.

CHAPTER X.

MRS. JICKLING MAKES AN IMPRESSION.

NOW Sarah the housemaid, after the manner of housemaids, was on particularly confidential terms with a certain fascinating young gentleman who called every day at Gorse Cottage on behalf of the local butcher; and one consequence of this intimacy was that the news of Mrs. Jickling's arrival spread all over the neighbourhood in the course of a very few hours. The intelligence was further seasoned by the expression of Sarah's opinion that her mistress's parent was "a queer sort;" a phrase which was variously interpreted according to the idiosyncracies of each person

to whose ears it came, so that the abstract queerness of the new-comer took a score of different phases in the concrete, all more or less conflicting,—and much curiosity was felt in consequence. Among Madame Mirabel's own friends the astonishment of course was great. It was impossible, they argued, that she could have been ignorant of her mother's impending arrival; how strange, then, that she should never have mentioned it, especially when she was being so strongly recommended to engage Miss Tabor as her companion! Mrs. Fullerton shook her head very portentously as she discussed the matter with Mrs. Chattering; and Mrs. Chattering (who had never taken quite so cordially to Madame Mirabel as the other ladies had) shook hers more portentously even than Mrs. Fullerton, with the significant remark that of course there was something in it, but that in such cases nobody could ever tell; while Mrs. Burman increased the excitement by saying that Madame Mirabel had assured

her, the very day the event took place, that her mother was quite an aged, feeble old lady with the most beautiful white hair, who lived a retired life near one of the London parks, and never went out of the house!

"Why, I never even knew she had a mother," exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, looking perfectly bewildered, when her husband came in with the news. "Now why should she have kept it such a secret all this time?"

"Indeed, mother, you did know it—I told you of it myself," said Gerard, looking up from his book.

"Never, my dear," said the good lady, with an emphatic gesture. "This is the first I've heard of it. How is it I've not the slightest recollection of such a thing, pray, if you ever told me of it, I should like to know?"

"It's because you have such a bad memory," replied Gerard, as he resumed his reading. "I told you of it the day after father met her going to Stockwell, and you

remarked what a queer neighbourhood it was for her mother to live in."

"Well, you may say so if you choose, my dear," retorted Mrs. Palliser briskly, "but it's just as likely that you *imagine* you told me as it is that I've *forgotten* it—more likely, indeed, if it comes to that. However, I'm going to tea with her on Friday, and then no doubt I shall see this Mrs. Jickling for myself."

The Pallisers were in excellent spirits at this time, for things were looking very prosperous with the Non-Intoxicating Liquor Association, and the shares were actually quoted at a premium. There was a spurt, too, in the share-market generally, a sort of reaction after the alarming depression that had occurred in the autumn, which was very pleasant for everybody concerned. It is true that there were a few over-prudent people who shook their heads, and talked about clouds on the horizon, and growled that it was all too good to last; but Mr.

Palliser took a more cheerful view of the situation, and lent a far readier ear to those who prophesied smooth things than to the croakers, as he was wont to call them in his good easy way. The old lady, meanwhile, had been growing gradually feebler, and there seemed little reason to doubt that a very few months would elapse before the inevitable end.

Madame Mirabel carried out her projected invasion of Mrs. Jickling's wardrobe with a thoroughness which considerably alarmed that lady. She divided her mother's apparel into two heaps — one consisting of such things as might be done something with, the other of articles which in her judgment did not come under that category. Among the latter were three caps—including those which Mrs. Jickling had already worn since her arrival—and a variety of the strangest odds and ends in the way of frippery, such as wisps of greasy velvet, 'bows' of startling pattern and prismatic tints, bead bracelets

which laid bare an indecent proportion of elastic, and other treasures of the same sort. Mrs. Jickling had a vague notion that these were being carefully put aside to be done up into more fashionable shapes; that the caps were destined for a new and brighter career of usefulness and beauty, and her cherished store of ribbons and tags and beads reserved for an equally desirable process of transformation. When, therefore, Madame Mirabel, without a word of warning or explanation, put the entire rubbish-heap upon the fire, with her best company-cap on the top, the poor old woman emitted a shriek that was heard in the very basement. It was, however, too late; her treasures were consumed in a few seconds, and for some hours she was a forlorn and capless mortal, bereft of all the outward and visible signs of her innate 'gentility,' and bemoaning the loss of her adornments in strains now pathetic, now morose. She was only partially appeased when Madame Mirabel walked her

down to Haslemere that afternoon—just as it was getting dusk—in order to repair the damage. Julia, she thought, having destroyed her property without consulting her, might at least have let her have a say in the purchases that were to replace it. But no, she wouldn't. Not in a single instance did she offer Mrs. Jickling a choice. And Julia's taste was so peculiar, too. She bought nothing but collars and wrist-bands, with frillings and twillings by the yard — any amount of such things; not an inch of ribbon of any colour; not a knickknack of any sort, and she so fond of knickknacks, too; while as for the caps, well, they weren't so bad, perhaps, but far too Quakerish for Mrs. Jickling's taste; white, they were, with the barest dash of colour here and there, but not a flower about them; a severity which Mrs. Jickling's *penchant* for blue roses and red chrysanthemums made her feel almost unnecessarily cruel. Remonstrance, however, was useless, for Madame Mirabel

did not even seem to hear what she said; the things were bought and paid for, and there was an end of the matter.

Thus it fell out that on the eventful Friday afternoon, the afternoon that was to witness her introduction to 'company' in her daughter's drawing-room, Mrs. Jickling presented a far more respectable appearance than she had ever done before. Robed in an old black-velvet dress of Madame Mirabel's, with snowy muslin cuffs and some delicate frilling of the same material round her throat, Mrs. Jickling looked actually presentable; indeed, she almost acknowledged as much as she surveyed herself in the pier-glass before going down. She was a woman who in her younger days had had more than the average share of good looks—a fact, be it whispered, to which was due the undoubted *mésalliance* perpetrated by Madame Mirabel's papa; but the sordid trials and struggles incident to a life of penury had done much towards debasing her features,

and their harsh outline was not mellowed by the cheap finery and coarse materials which her uncultivated taste no less than her unfortunately narrow means had hitherto prompted her to wear.

It was partly nervousness, and partly a confused sense of her own dignity, which induced Mrs. Jickling to defer her appearance in the drawing-room until after the ladies had arrived. Madame Mirabel was therefore sitting alone when Mrs. Fullerton, Mrs. Chattering, and Mrs. Burman were shown in; and she immediately detected, by their looks of expectation and curiosity, that they were dying to see her mother. The situation amused her greatly, though she was perfectly well aware that her teeth were to be set on edge a score of times that afternoon at the very least. Humiliation in its keenest form is seldom without a saving touch of the ludicrous.

"And so your mother's come to live with you, I hear," said Mrs. Fullerton, archly, as

she settled herself comfortably upon the sofa. "Ah, now we know why poor Miss Tabor wasn't good enough for you. Oh, you sly creature! Isn't she a sly creature, Mrs. Chattering? *We've* heard all about it. Well, I must say I think you're very wise; it wasn't at all nice for you to be living alone, and your mother is the very best companion that you could possibly have."

"I assure you," replied Madame Mirabel, "that my mother's arrival was a complete surprise to me. She came to consult me on a matter of some importance to herself, and I do not think it at all likely that she will remain long."

"Really!" exclaimed Mrs. Chattering before Mrs. Fullerton could speak. "Well, we thought it was very strange you never told us anything about her; but of course if you didn't expect her yourself that's another thing. I've no doubt she'll be a great acquisition to the neighbourhood as long as she remains, though she'll find it

dull, I'm afraid, after London. There is always such a deal going on in London—concerts, and winter exhibitions, you know, and the Old Masters every now and then—so delightful it must be; while here, of course—well, one doesn't expect that sort of thing. Thank you, a piece of tea-cake, please,—I'm always partial to tea-cake; I used to eat scarcely anything else when I was a girl at home."

"Except crumpets, I suppose," said Mrs. Fullerton, chuckling.

"I don't imagine Madame Mirabel's dear mother has been able to go about much to exhibitions," put in Mrs. Burman; "she is so very infirm, you know. How long is it since she last went out, did you tell me?"—turning to Madame Mirabel with an air of tender enquiry. "Quite an old lady, of course. The journey must have been a sad fatigue to her, I am afraid. I hope we shall have the pleasure of seeing her to-day—or does she never leave her room?"

"I think she'll make an effort to come down on this occasion," answered Madame Mirabel with a peculiar smile. "Ah, here's Mrs. Palliser. Come and sit here, Mrs. Palliser, near the fire; I know how you feel the cold. Will you have tea or coffee?"

"How cosy you all look!" said Mrs. Palliser jauntily, as she responded to her hostess's greeting and took the seat reserved for her. "I'll have coffee, please. I oughtn't to drink tea, you know—it's so bad for my poor nerves. And how have you been, Mrs. Chattering, since we last met? I haven't seen you for an age."

"I'm never quite at my best in the winter," replied Mrs. Chattering, "but I've managed to steer pretty clear of colds hitherto, I'm glad to say. Poor Rosie hasn't been so fortunate, — she's had a dreadful cough, and Dr. Lancaster doesn't seem to do her one bit of good."

"Dear child!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser sympathetically.

"And are you all well at home?" asked Mrs. Fullerton.

"Yes, thank you, though we've not escaped colds and such like," said Mrs. Palliser. "Of course poor dear old Mrs. Palliser will never be any better; that is not to be expected. Still, she's pretty quiet, and doesn't suffer at all, so we've much to be thankful for in spite of everything. My husband's gone up to town to-day."

"And Gerard?" asked Madame Mirabel.

"Gerard is expecting to go to Sweden before long," replied Mrs. Palliser. "There's a most splendid opening for him there. Of course I don't want it talked about, and I shouldn't dream of mentioning the matter to anybody but just ourselves—quite in confidence, you know; but the last accounts we received were most promising, and we have great hopes that in a few weeks dear Gerard will"——

Mrs. Palliser stopped short, for at that moment a sound was heard in the passage

which arrested everybody's attention. Then the door was slowly opened, and the face of Mrs. Jickling was seen peering into the room. The ladies all rose to their feet in expectation. A little rustle of astonishment was heard as the tall, gaunt, iron-grey, elderly woman advanced towards them with hesitating steps, and made a half-bewildered little bow to nobody in particular. Mrs. Burman fairly gasped as her eyes rested on the prototype of her dear, feeble, white-haired old lady, and for a moment she had no word to utter; Mrs. Fullerton looked patronising, Mrs. Palliser smiling and gracious, while Mrs. Chattering put up her double eye-glass with an air of the frankest possible impertinence. Madame Mirabel, as usual, was quite equal to the occasion.

"Allow me to introduce my mother, Mrs. Jickling," she said, presenting her to each of the ladies in turn. "She has come to spend a week or two with me in the country. There's a chair for you, mother—next to

Mrs. Chattering. Will you have tea or coffee?"

Mrs. Jickling, who had imagined that she would find the ladies seated round a well-spread tea-table arrayed in mittens and smart caps, was both astonished and dismayed at the informal nature of the entertainment. Her first impulse was to take Julia to task for not inviting them to remove their bonnets; but her courage failed, and she sank submissively into the seat assigned to her, sipping her coffee with a half frightened air which contrasted very curiously with the amused nonchalance of Madame Mirabel.

"You live in London, I believe, Mrs. Jickling," remarked Mrs. Fullerton in her deep voice. "Well, it's the centre of everything—quite the capital of the world, in fact. It's quite a pleasure to see somebody from town. We're so very quiet here, you know. I suppose London's beginning to fill up now, isn't it?"

"The streets are mostly pretty full, I think," replied Mrs. Jickling, warily. "But I live retired; I can't say I see much of what's goin' on. Most of my gadding was done when I was a young woman, like Julia here. Have you lived in the country long, ma'am?"

"Yes, for many years," said Mrs. Fullerton.

"Must 'ave been very dull for you, I should think," remarked Mrs. Jickling. "Give me London; only in London of course one requires a good income, and a good income is just what some people haven't got."

"Very few people are satisfied with their incomes," replied Mrs. Fullerton; "it all depends on what you call a good income. *I* always say that everybody's rich who only spends eighty per cent. of his means; that's what *I* do, and I don't know why more people don't follow my example. There'd be far less pauperism in the world if they did."

"A most excellent theory for those who have a thousand a year," put in Madame Mirabel.

"Ah! If we could get five-penny loaves for four-pence farthing we'd all be well-to-do," said Mrs. Jickling. "It's a bad thing to be poor. It brings one down among the common people, and shuts one out from everything worth havin'. Not as *I* complain. I saw plenty o' life when I was first married—parties and theatres every night, mostly, and comp'ny, oh, any amount; never was such gaiety as we used to 'ave. Now, of course, I've done with all that. I'm gettin' on in years, and prefer to live quiet, as Julia there will tell you."

"Ah! Quite so," said Mrs. Chattering. "And I believe you live in a nice quiet neighbourhood—near one of the parks, I think I've heard. Well, that's almost as good as the country. I used to live close by Kensington Gardens myself, and the grass and trees and water were really charming—

and then all the people one used to see, so cheerful, you know, particularly on Sundays after church, and in the afternoon—quite the prettiest park in Europe, I always think."

"Oh, ay; I shouldn't wonder," answered Mrs. Jickling.

"It's perfectly sweet!" exclaimed Mrs. Palliser, enthusiastically. "I love Kensington Gardens—and the Ring, you know, and the Row, and the Ladies' Mile. The dear Princess drives there constantly, and I always envied the men taking off their hats to her—I longed to do something of the same sort, only of course there's nothing we *can* do, is there? Oh, I'd go and live in London to-morrow if I could live near one of the parks. It is such a pity that our dear Queen is there so seldom."

"I suppose you often see the Princess driving in the park, Mrs.—a—Jingles—I *beg* your pardon; I have such a wretched ear for names—I should say Mrs. Jickling," said Mrs. Chattering.

"Not very lately, ma'am," confessed Mrs. Jickling. "My 'ouse is in Royalty Park—Augusta-Victoria Villas, Royalty Park, in the south o' London, and for all its name royalties don't patronise our neighbourhood over and above. No, I live very quiet, just keep myself *to* myself, and only know as many people as I wish to. I always think one's own circle of acquaintance should be kep' select, and in a place like London one never need know anybody one doesn't want to."

"For my part," observed Mrs. Burman in her cooing way, "I prefer travelling. I dare say you don't go abroad very much; of course it has its hardships, especially if one isn't a very good sailor, but still I love the change to foreign countries. You've been a great traveller in your time, Madame Mirabel, I believe?"

"Well, I was in the East for some years," replied Madame Mirabel. "But I confess I like Europe better. It was delightful at the Riviera when I was there lately—I mean the

perpetual sunshine, of course, and the fine scenery. It is always a great relief to get out of England for the winter."

"Indeed it is," chimed in Mrs. Palliser, patting her full grey curls complacently. "I've never been to the Riviera; that's a pleasure to come. But I love Paris—so gay and bright, you know, and the beautiful Bois to drive in, and the Champs Elysées—oh, it's all lovely, I think. Switzerland, too. Do you know Interlachen, Mrs. Jickling? It is the very sweetest place. You weren't at the Riviera with Madame Mirabel, I think?"

"I was not, ma'am," replied Mrs. Jickling; "in fact I'd only just come back from abroad myself when she went."

Madame Mirabel, with a carelessness very unusual in her, here happened to knock over a tea-cup, making a clatter which for the moment called off the attention of the ladies from the conversation.

"Oh indeed," resumed Mrs. Palliser with

friendly interest. "That must have been a nice change for you after London. Where did you go to, may I ask?"

"I stayed mostly at a place called Gursaw," answered Mrs. Jickling. "You may 'ave been there, if you know Switzerland—on the lake, you know, about an hour from Lucerne. Plenty of first-rate visitors there were, too, and everything done in style—late dinner every day, and dancin' afterwards for them as liked it. I can't say I thought much o' the wines, though—poor thin stuff they were, as wouldn't intoxicate a fly; while as for their breakfasts, well, it's a mercy I never was much of a hand at breakfast, for I was nearly starved as it was, bein' accustomed all my life to my egg and rasher of a mornin', a thing you couldn't get in Switzerland for love or money—nothing but a lot of flimsy crusts and some stuff they said was honey, but which I believe was nothing more than pear-juice and glycerine. Otherwise, ma'am, and on the whole, I certainly approved of

Switzerland," concluded Mrs. Jickling, "and though some persons did try and put upon me and take advantage of me through being a foreigner, they all belonged to the lower orders, and I'm bound to confess that the people of the house I stayed at were as honest in their charges as could be expected."

"The pithiest *impressions de voyage* I ever remember to have heard," exclaimed Mrs. Chattering, with scarcely veiled contempt. "You have summed up the entire subject, Mrs. Jickling, in the fewest possible words. Certainly travelling has this advantage—that it opens people's minds and enlarges their views of life; we stay-at-homes are apt to get very rusty and stupid. I always feel at a disadvantage in the presence of anybody who has seen the world. It's quite an education in itself."

"It's not of much use, though, without the culture which comes from books," remarked Madame Mirabel, who had her own reasons

for wishing to divert attention from Mrs. Jickling's Continental experiences.

"A very just remark," said Mrs. Fullerton approvingly. "I think I've heard that said before; or perhaps I've read it somewhere. There's nothing like books, when they're judiciously selected. Your daughter is a great reader, Mrs. Jickling, as I dare say you know. It's really wonderful, when one thinks what a power books are in the world, both for good and evil. I always make it a rule myself to read only high-class literature —books which deal with the highest subjects, and treat them in the most unexceptionable way. I dare say, now, that you have been a great reader in your time, Mrs. Jickling, and I'm sure that you'll agree with me."

"Yes, indeed, I'm quite of your way of thinking," replied Mrs. Jickling. "I can't abide low books—all about the lower orders, you know, like Dickens's, for instance. Give me books with some style in 'em—as makes you think the author must 'a moved in good

society, and knows the world, and understands what he's writin' about. But low life —oh, lor! It's disagreeable enough in reality, and I can't see what pleasure there can be in readin' about it, for my part. I always think the less one knows about such things the better."

"Oh, dear! I don't think I meant that exactly," exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton. "Some of the best books we have are about the poor. You evidently prefer stories of fashionable life?"

"Well, I must say I do," said Mrs. Jickling with decision.

"To be sure," remarked Mrs. Chattering sweetly. "It's only natural that we should derive the greatest enjoyment from a description of the scenes and people we are most familiar with."

Madame Mirabel's eyes emitted a scornful flash. It was at least some consolation to see that her mother was not the only person present who lacked refinement. "Let me

give you another cup of tea, Mrs. Chattering," she said, by way of evincing her gratitude.

"Well," said Mrs. Palliser cheerfully, "what I enjoy most is a really good *religious* novel. Who was it who said that the brightest examples of Christian character were to be found in fiction? I can't remember at the moment—I have such a treacherous memory. However, I know it struck me at the time as being a most impressive observation."

"And who is your favourite religious novelist?" asked Mrs. Fullerton.

"Well, George Eliot is one," replied Mrs. Palliser; "I look upon 'Adam Bede' as quite a religious book, you know—Dinah Morris the Methodist is alone sufficient to stamp it with that character. I only wish all our novelists were so sweetly pious. Oh, and then there are the Howitts, and dear Mrs. Stowe, and Dr. Farrar—all beautiful writers in their way—and Catherine

Sinclair, who wrote that lovely 'Father Clement.'"

"Very true, very true indeed," murmured Mrs. Burman. "Don't *you* admire George Eliot, Mrs. Jickling?"

"H'm—I can't say I'm fond of Methodistical writers myself," answered that lady with a sniff. "Sermons are all very well in church, I dare say, but I don't care for 'em in books, especially when they try to make out as decent people are on a level with publicans and thieves. I s'pose we're all sinners in a way, but Methodism is a thing as I can't abide—there's something low about it, as is only fit for common people. I prefer my religion in a genteeler form."

The ladies looked somewhat dubious at this, and one or two of them were inclined to smile. Madame Mirabel, having made up her mind to the worst, actually took a sort of sardonic pleasure in the repeated shocks from which her friends were suffering. What did it matter, after all? That her mother was a

common, vulgar-minded old person was unfortunately a fact not to be disputed; and if it were ordained that she should suddenly appear among them all and make an exhibition of herself, well, she could not help it, and there was nothing more to be said. What did Madame Mirabel care for the opinion of her neighbours? They were nothing to her, except in so far as their countenance and intercourse might help on the attainment of the only object she now had in life—the prize for which she had staked everything. At the same time the reference to Mrs. Jickling's tour to Switzerland gave her an unpleasant twinge, and afforded an additional illustration of the imperative necessity of providing for her elsewhere at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mrs. Fullerton, who in spite of her foibles had the instincts of a lady — which was scarcely true in the fullest sense of Mrs. Chattering — now turned the conversation into a more general channel, in order to

shield Mrs. Jickling from the risk of committing herself still further. She saw clearly enough that Mrs. Jickling was (as she expressed it) impossible; and felt that Madame Mirabel was rather to be pitied than blamed for being handicapped with so very undesirable a parent. Furthermore she was inclined to admire her for the brave face she put upon the matter, and decided that as long as Mrs. Jickling remained in Hindhead she would give her such countenance as would support Madame Mirabel under the burden that had been laid upon her. Mrs. Palliser, always kindly and courteous, saw at a glance how matters stood, and came virtually to the same conclusion; but Mrs. Chattering was perceived, by that subtle freemasonry which exists among women, to be distinctly contemptuous and hostile, while Mrs. Burman could not bring herself to forgive Madame Mirabel for having allowed her to be so grossly misled as to the colour of Mrs. Jickling's hair.

Nothing could have been more effusive than the way in which all the visitors eventually took leave. Mrs. Chattering was especially gushing, and vowed that Madame Mirabel's tea-cakes transcended any she had ever tasted before; or if it wasn't that, it was the delightful conversation she had enjoyed, and the pleasure of making so inestimable a new acquaintance. There was something very womanly about Mrs. Chattering. Good Mrs. Palliser walked part of the way home with her, and the two ladies enjoyed themselves amazingly in comparing notes. What pleasure, after all, is comparable to that derived from 'talking over' other people! When we apply to the process the popular expression 'picking them to pieces,' there is conveyed to the mind a suggestion of opprobrium and uncharity; but if we use the more scientific term 'analysis,' which after all means very much the same, all condemnation on the score of malice is rendered antecedently impossible.

Madame Mirabel meanwhile taxed her brains to discover some way out of the difficulty in which she found herself, and Mrs. Jickling sank into a complacent reverie.

END OF VOL. II.

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